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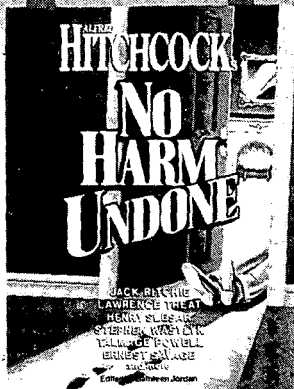
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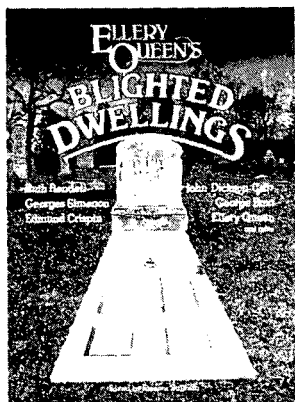
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Every so often we have discussed here how manuscripts should be submitted to this magazine, and perhaps we should do so again for the benefit of those potential contributors who weren't with us the last time that information appeared (almost two years ago). We have found that many persons (a) don't know that we accept unsolicited manuscripts, or (b) call or write with questions about the procedure of submitting them. We're happy to answer those questions, and to send a copy of our Writer's Guidelines if a stamped self-addressed envelope is enclosed, but we also know that often people don't even think to inquire, on the assumption that we commission stories or buy only from established writers.

'Tisn't true. We don't commission any stories; *all* our sto-

ries come from freelance writers, often from new writers. In this issue, for instance, we have one first story—Allen M. Widem's "The Ubiquitous Uncle"—and one almost-first story, William Kyer West's "Hector's Passing." (Mr. West and Mr. Widem are, it is true, experienced writers of nonfiction, but we don't hold that against them.) In 1987, in fact, AHMM published 19 first stories; *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, our sister publication, published ten. And we don't need convincing that first stories can be excellent; as we indicated last time (ahem), AHMM stories have won four out of five Robert Fish awards for Best First Mystery Short Story of the year.

All manuscripts should, of course, be typed, one side of the paper only, and *double*-spaced, please, *not* space-and-a-half

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(makes editing hard). Please, if you use a word processor, do *not* justify the right-hand margin (we pay by the word; the above makes getting an accurate word count hard). Your name and address should be typed at the top of the first page of the story.

The story should be sent to us flat, not folded, and the pages should be paper clipped together, not stapled or fastened into any kind of binder. No cover letter is necessary, and we'd rather not have a plot summary. The maximum length we accept is fourteen thousand words; there is no minimum.

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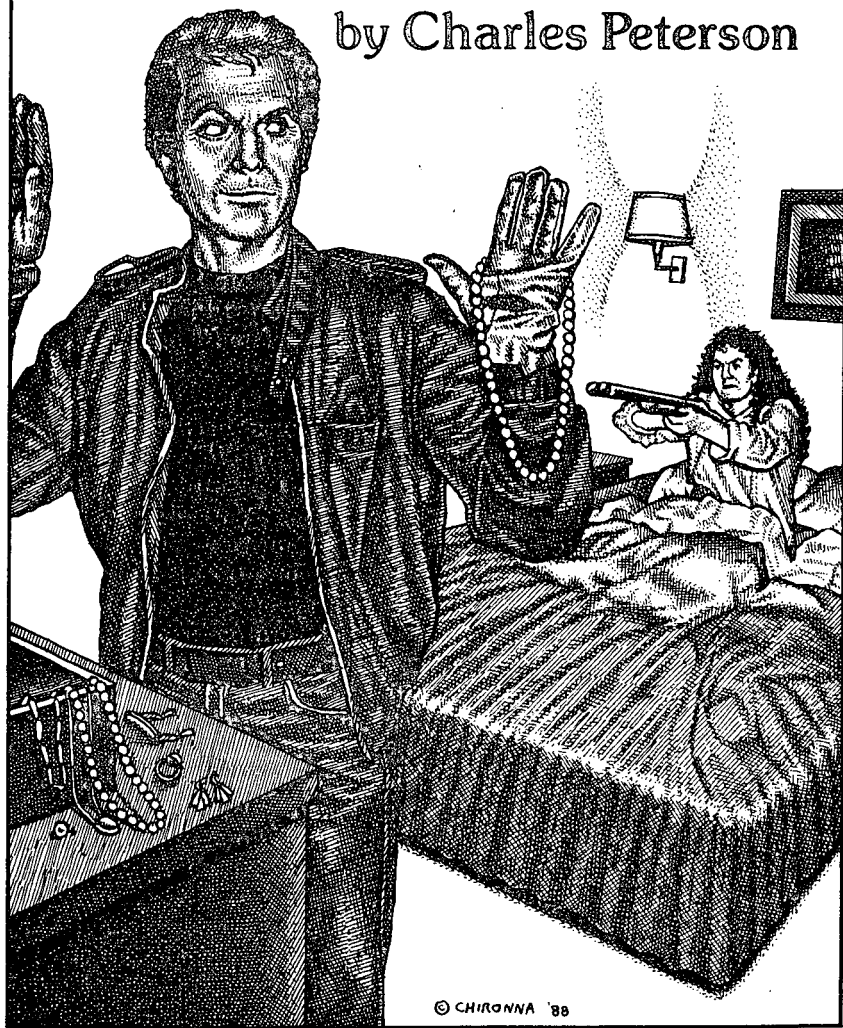
self-addressed envelope big enough for the story's return in the event we're not able to use it (or a business-sized envelope for our response if you don't want the manuscript back—but please include a note to that effect). Persons living outside the United States should enclose International Reply Coupons in lieu of stamps; they are obtainable from your local post office.

Finally, address the manuscript to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017. And that's all there is to it!

FICTION

Augie and the Fatal Fascination

by Charles Peterson



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Illustration by Ronald Chironna

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Like many other freelancers, those of us in the cat-burgling profession have moments when we wonder if we shouldn't have pursued some less aggravating career. Alligator wrestling, say. Or high-diving into wet handkerchiefs.

In my case, of course, the question is answered one night when I emerge from a second story window to find a couple of cops standing below, applauding. This begins a train of events that ultimately turns Kit the Cat Burglar into Up-standing Citizen Augie Augenblick, Ret., after a session with the parole board. But even before this I have some doubts. For instance, there is the time a certain book collector commissions me to lift an antique prayer book from a rectory wall safe. Unbeknownst to me, on that particular evening the prayer book is on exhibit at some book fair, and what I end up with is the souvenir program book of the Monkton Boys Choir National Tour of some fifteen years back. I am embarrassed and the collector is quite miffed, claiming I should be able to tell the difference in the dark—which is true. I am left with no payola, only the vital statistics and mug shots of three dozen boy sopranos—not the most thrilling reading on a cold winter night.

Even worse, though, is what happens early one morning as I am making a selection of baubles from some dame's jewel box. All of a sudden a light snaps on, and a feminine voice utters those three little words I dislike so much—namely: "Get 'em up!"

This is followed by a command to turn around, whereupon I find I am gazing down the barrel of what appears to be an antitank gun wielded by a football linebacker wearing a lacy pink nightgown.

"What in blazes do you think you're up to?" demands this vision, hoisting herself up out of bed and looming belligerently.

I start nervously and blink several times. "Good heavens, where am I?" I cry. "How did I get here? I must have been sleepwalking again!"

"Haw!" snorts the female, with a derisive toss of her carrotty hair. "You gotta do better than that, Mac, or I'll fill you so full of holes they'll be able to play you like a clarinet. Say," she adds, giving me a searching look, "don't I know you from somewhere?"

"I've never been there," I reply. All the same, I have the disquieting feeling that I know *her* from somewhere, too. Where have I seen that nutcracker jaw before? That hair? And those icy blue eyes?

"Cork it!" she says, resuming her study of the physiognomy. "By gosh!" she says at last. "Got it! You're Kit the Cat Burglar!"

I am about to utter an outraged denial when a strange thing happens. The brows unknit, flames cease to shoot from the eyes, the gun is lowered, and something like a girlish giggle escapes those recently curled lips.

"Golly!" she breathes. "Kit the Cat Burglar! My kid brother told me all about you. I've been dying to meet you."

"Your kid brother?"

"Lochinvar."

I know only one Lochinvar—also known as Locky McCloskey, son of Knuckles McCloskey, who once hired me to instruct Locky in the essentials of cat burgling—a nightmarish episode I wish I could forget. Knuckles is the original of that jaw, that hair, those eyes, and a horrid suspicion begins to grow that I may have chosen an inappropriate house to burgle tonight. At the same time, an idea strikes me as to how to salvage the situation. "Locky told me a lot about you, as a matter of fact."

"He did, really?"

"That's why I wanted to meet you, too. But I couldn't figure out how to go about it, until—"

She gives a little gasp. "You mean this is your idea of get-

ting together? Well, I never! How romantic! Imagine!"

There is more of this, with me trying to get a word in every now and then to the effect that it's all been very pleasant but I have a bus to catch, so goodbye. But to no avail, and I am stunned to find, at the conclusion of the interview, that somehow or other I have become engaged to Guinevere, only daughter of one of the F.B.I.'s favorite mob chiefs, Knuckles McCloskey.

When Knuckles McCloskey wants to talk to someone, he avoids the telephone, suspecting that they are full of bugs, hence unsanitary. Instead, one of his boys materializes, taps you on the shoulder, and invites you to follow him, at which time you cancel all previous engagements and hope to have a future to reschedule them in. I am not too happy—but not too surprised, knowing his sources of information—to find myself tapped thus the next day and delivered presently to an office where Knuckles sits fiddling with his trusty .38 revolver.

"Sit!" he says. "Stay!" He waves me to a chair, dismisses my guide, and squints at me along the barrel of his .38. "Ever wonder how you'd look

with a center part, Kit?"

"Ulp!" I comment, and he chuckles to indicate this is all in fun.

"I understand you and Gwen are a thing," he says, stifling the merriment.

"That about describes it."

He has a searching look much like Guinevere's, only his has more the effect of examining something undulating across the salad bar. "Well, I guess there's no accounting for tastes. Personally, I'd have been happier if she'd picked somebody with a little more heft. And maybe farther up the ladder than a second story man."

"You can't get much higher than the second story in my business," I point out. "And I hardly ever get to use a ladder."

One does not make funnies with Knuckles McCloskey. His trigger finger twitches ominously, but the recollection of some past favors I've been able to do him apparently registers. He relaxes—as do I, adding hastily, "Well, Gwen and I hoped you would approve, but if you object—well, I'll bow out gracefully . . ."

I might as well be snapping, crackling, and popping back at my breakfast cereal. "Approve?" he says, with a shrug. "Whatever Gwenny wants is A-OK with me. I just hope she makes it stick this time."

"This time?"

"Oh, she's always getting engaged to bimbos. Then the next thing you know, the two of 'em have a spat, or the guy tries to break it off, and she comes in shedding tears like a lawn sprinkler, and then I have to go wind it up 'cause she's too tender-hearted. It is all very time-consuming. Besides, last time they nearly caught me disposing of the body."

"D-D-Disposing of the b-b-b—?"

Knuckles looked indignant. "You don't suppose any bimbo is gonna make my Gwenny cry and get away with it, do you?" There is a pause while this sinks in, about six feet deep; then he goes on, "Well, I only called you in to say congratulations and best wishes. Hope you live happily ever after. If possible."

He dismisses me and I exit, accompanied to the outer door by my former guide, a beefy bloke known as "Twister" Hesselgesser. Like many of Knuckles' nearest and dearest, Twister is about eight feet tall and built along the lines of an armored car, and his nickname, I understand, derives from his talent—useful in one of Knuckles' enforcers—of turning recalcitrant debtors into pretzels. When he leans on people, they tend to be permanently bent

out of shape, and I am somewhat alarmed to note that he regards me with distinct displeasure. This is puzzling because I have not, to my knowledge, stepped on any of his toes lately.

However, I am much too concerned with keeping Guinevere McCloskey happy to fret about Twister, for this turns out to be a project that interferes significantly with business. It seems she can hardly get enough details of my career, and after a few nights I begin to feel like a second story Scheherazade. In return, I am regaled with Irish tenors, for Guinevere also has an unplumbed capacity for renditions of "Macushla," "Mother Machree," anything with a "Mavoureen" in it, and songs that touch upon various geographical locations in Ireland. But her favorite is "Danny Boy," a number that soon sets my teeth permanently on edge.

I don't know if you are familiar with "Danny Boy," but its big moment comes toward the end, when the tenor flexes his larynx, hauls up his slacks, and, giving the line a good deal of muscle, belts out, "'Tis I'll be THERE in sunshine and in shadow . . ."—hitting on "there" a high E or F, or maybe even an I, that is enough to etch glass. What is worse, it tends to make Guinevere's eyes water, and I live in fear that at any

minute Knuckles may enter, discover his daughter in tears, and leap to possibly fatal conclusions.

Between song and story, then, time plods along in this series of dates with Guinevere, which are rather circumscribed since Knuckles does not like to have his daughter circulating in public without a guardian hovering in the background. Most of the time said guardian is Twister, and his notion of hovering is daunting, to say the least. It is like being on a picnic and constantly aware that a funnel cloud is apt to swoop down on the tuna sandwiches at any moment.

In a way this is okay because it tends to discourage more intimate relations with Guinevere. But in a way this is not okay, because during the occasional intervals when Twister and I find ourselves alone—with Guinevere off hunting up a vintage John McCormack record, for example—he remains persistently uncordial. As with my first encounter with Guinevere, I have the sensation that I have met Twister before, though this is so unlikely that I finally decide it is just that he is so ever-present that I think perhaps he's always been there. But one evening I observe his fists clenching and unclenching while plumes of steam arise from under his collar, and de-

duce that something is bothering him.

"One of these days, worm," he mutters, and the gnashing of his teeth is like a gravel crusher in operation, "I'm going to find an excuse to take you apart like a Tinkertoy and put you in a box—Knuckles or no Knuckles!"

This outburst of ill-will takes me aback. "Why?"

"To see a babe like Gwen wasting her time, going ape over a pipsqueak like you, it's more than a guy can stand," he says, articulating rather well through his locked jaws. "What she sees in a toad like you is more than I can figure."

I could do with a little less of the pipsqueak and toad business, but decide not to press the matter.

"Before you came along, sneaking in through windows and sweet-talking around, I was aces with Gwen," he continues. "Now she can't see me for mud. But wait. I have the feeling that once she finds you scattered about in tiny pieces, she'll change her mind—girls often do."

It hasn't dawned on me before that Guinevere McCloskey might be someone else's idea of a soulmate, but Twister's outburst explains a good deal. I am on the point of telling him that as far as I'm concerned he and Guinevere can trickle off into the sunset with my blessing at

any time, when the specter of Knuckles pursing his lips and twirling his .38 comes to mind. I am grateful to think that Twister is being held in leash by such a great natural force.

Twister's jaw muscles work as he idly bends a spoon into a granny knot. "So my advice to you, you rat, is don't let me catch you out in the open, or I'll punch you so hard you'll vibrate like a tuning fork for a week!"

I mull this over, then rise. "Excuse me," I say. "I have to go write a letter."

"Dear Abby—" I write for the eleventh time, and for the eleventh time toss away the crumpled sheet. It's no good. Even a self-addressed stamped envelope is not going to provide any answer to my problem. If I bow out of Guinevere's life, thereby causing her to lapse into melancholy, Knuckles is going to take me out and plant me in some scantily populated area to cheer her up. If I don't, Twister Hesselgesser is likely to conduct a painful disassembly procedure—and it will only be a matter of time before he tumbles to the fact that Knuckles doesn't really care what happens to me, one way or the other.

There is the remote chance that Guinevere may change her mind herself and get me off the

hook, and I try to encourage this by calling her attention to some of Twister's sterling qualities.

"Twister is really built, isn't he?" I say, admiringly. "I'm not surprised that lots of girls go for that type."

"Is he?" says Guinevere, yawning. "Muscles aren't everything. I'd like to see him try to shinny up a drainpipe like you, sweetie!"

"I understand he can crack walnuts one-handed."

"Yeah, but can he crack a safe like my little Snookums?" she replies, with a soulful look.

"Ever see him tie knots in spoons?" I ask, growing more desperate.

"Have you heard this one?" says Guinevere, selecting another LP record, and presently I am listening to Dennis Day inquiring whether my mother came from Ireland. It is all very disheartening, besides calling for some adroit footwork to keep out of Twister's ken when Guinevere is not about. Unfortunately, time runs out on me as I suspected it might.

This occurs one afternoon as I am at home wondering if it will do any good to write the White House or the premier of the Soviet Union, when all at once the door is flung open with a crash and I see Twister standing there, preparing to

register on the Richter scale.

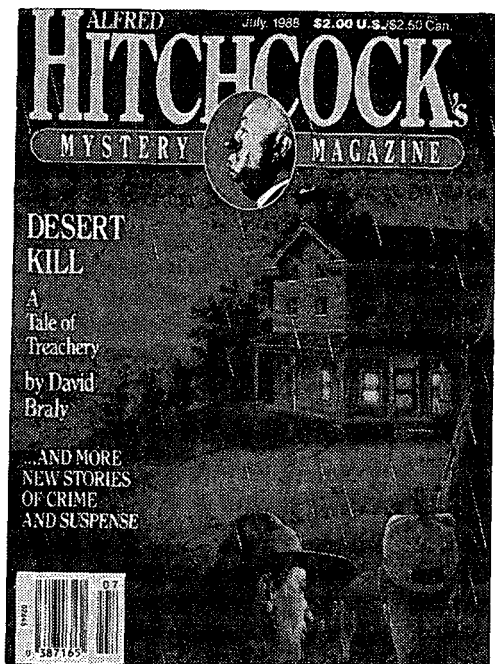
"I can't take it no more!" he roars, shucking off his coat. His muscles swell as though someone had inflated them with a bicycle pump. "I've had it up to here!" he adds, grabbing me by the shirt front. "I'm through monkeying around!" he concludes, cocking a fist and about to wreak bodily harm.

"Hold it!" I bark. And the forcefulness of my tone causes him to pause in mid-launch, rather to our mutual surprise.

The reason for the tone of authority is that my *déjà vu* has suddenly clicked into focus, and I recall where I have seen Twister before.

"This is most unseemly behavior," I say crisply, "for someone once known far and wide as Gaylord Hesselgesser, leading soprano of the Monkton Boys Choir."

I don't know if you have ever seen one of those television news shots of a building demolition, where they set off charges around the base and the whole building sort of leaps like a startled rabbit and hangs suspended in mid-air for a moment before collapsing in a heap of dust and debris. Something of the kind happens to Twister at this point, and when the dust has settled he looks up at me from the wreckage with something like panic in his eyes.



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"Not so loud, for Pete's sake," he moans, plucking nervously at my trouser leg. "How'd you know about that?"

"We have our methods," I reply, marveling that, although several tons weightier than his mug shot in the Monkton Boys Choir souvenir book, Twister still remains recognizable. "Come, come, Gaylord; stop licking my shoes. Your secret is safe with me."

He looks hopeful, as one who hears, even faintly, the sound of the cavalry approaching. "You're not gonna tell? You know what the rest of the boys would say if they found out? I'd be off the first team and back fetching coffee and serving as lookout for guys like Eddie and Germ and Moonface Muggsy. I'd never live it down."

"It's just between you and me," I promise, adding a prudent note to the effect that there is a sealed envelope in my lawyer's hands in case anything should happen to me. There will be shortly, anyway.

Twister mops his brow as the color surges back into his face. "Thank you, Kit—er—Mr. Kit. I always knew you were the right sort. Yes. I have often remarked to the fellows down at the hideout that Kit is the right sort." He smooths my rumpled shirt, straightens my skewed necktie, and flicks a bit of lint off my shoulder. "If there's any

little thing I can do for you . . ."

"Well, now that you mention it, there is something," I say.

As has become all too customary, Guinevere and I are tightly wedged into a loveseat built for two, provided one of them isn't Guinevere McCloskey, and the stereo is telling the world all about my wild Irish rose, and she is requesting me to relate once more how I made off with the Rensselaer pearls. It looks like just another evening in the McCloskey manse when all at once the stereo makes a noise like a cat using up the last of its nine lives and declines to say more.

"Holy shamrocks!" says Guinevere. "What's all this?"

"Sounds like we just blew a transistor."

Guinevere rises and peers into the stereo as an unfamiliar silence oozes into every nook and cranny. "What'll we do?"

"Sorry—transistors aren't my thing. But where were we? Oh, yes; as it happened, I had cased the Rensselaer place more thoroughly than usual, so . . ."

"Can't you jiggle something and fix it?"

"Only if it's a wall safe. Like I said—"

"Forget the wall safes," snaps Guinevere. "What we need at the moment is less talk about the moment is less talk about wall safes and more helpful

suggestions on getting this thing going."

"Sorry—" I begin again, but at that moment there comes floating in from the hallway a voice raised in song.

"O, Danny boy," it carols in a dulcet tenor, calling attention to the fact that the pipes are calling.

"So I knew exactly where Mathilda Rensellaer kept her more expensive stuff, like that pearl choker . . ."

"Quiet!" says Guinevere, with a gesture. "Listen!"

The voice in the hallway observes that the aforementioned pipes can be listened to in glen and mountainside.

"—and naturally I had previously checked out the french windows leading into the library—"

"Shut up!" says Guinevere, her eyes beginning to glaze. I sense that somehow I seem to be losing my grasp on my audience.

The disembodied songster continues to stress the point that he will be around regardless of meteorological conditions, such as when the summer's gone, the flowers dying, the valley white with snow, and furthermore, that whether it's sunny or not, he'll be there. And on the high note of "there" Guinevere quivers as though she'd just been harpooned.

"Who is that?" she wonders, yanking open the door. "You?!" she cries.

Twister Hesselgesser, for it is he, breaks off in mid-yodel and looks sheepish. "Sorry, Gwen," he says. "Every so often I get this urge to sing. It won't happen again."

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"It had better," says Guinevere. "Come on in. I had no idea you could sing like that. Do it some more."

At this point the stereo suddenly resumes with "My Wild Irish Rose," as a result of my having surreptitiously replaced the plug I had surreptitiously unplugged a few minutes ago. "Ah, it's working again!" I say, with satisfaction. "Now we can take up where I left off. There I was, waiting in the bushes outside the Rensselaers' library windows, when all at once . . ."

"Get lost, Kit," says Guinevere, not looking at me but at Twister. "Sing some more, honey." And Twister, pausing only long enough to give me a quick grin as I exit, does so.

"**T**ough lines, Kit," says Knuckles McCloskey a few days later. "Gui-

nevere throwing you over like that."

"Best man won, and all," I sigh.

"Good thing it wasn't the other way around. You'd've been pushing daisies."

"Some things aren't meant to be."

I assume a doleful look, which may be too doleful because Knuckles clucks his tongue sympathetically.

"Tell you what," he says. "I'll set you up with my cousin Rosie—everybody says she and Guinevere are like enough to be sisters. No—don't thank me; it's the least I can do. How about something for a week from Saturday?"

It is the next week when the cops nab me and I get put away for three to five, with time off for good behavior.

I go quietly.

Make that "gratefully."

FICTION

Hector's Passing

by William Kyer West

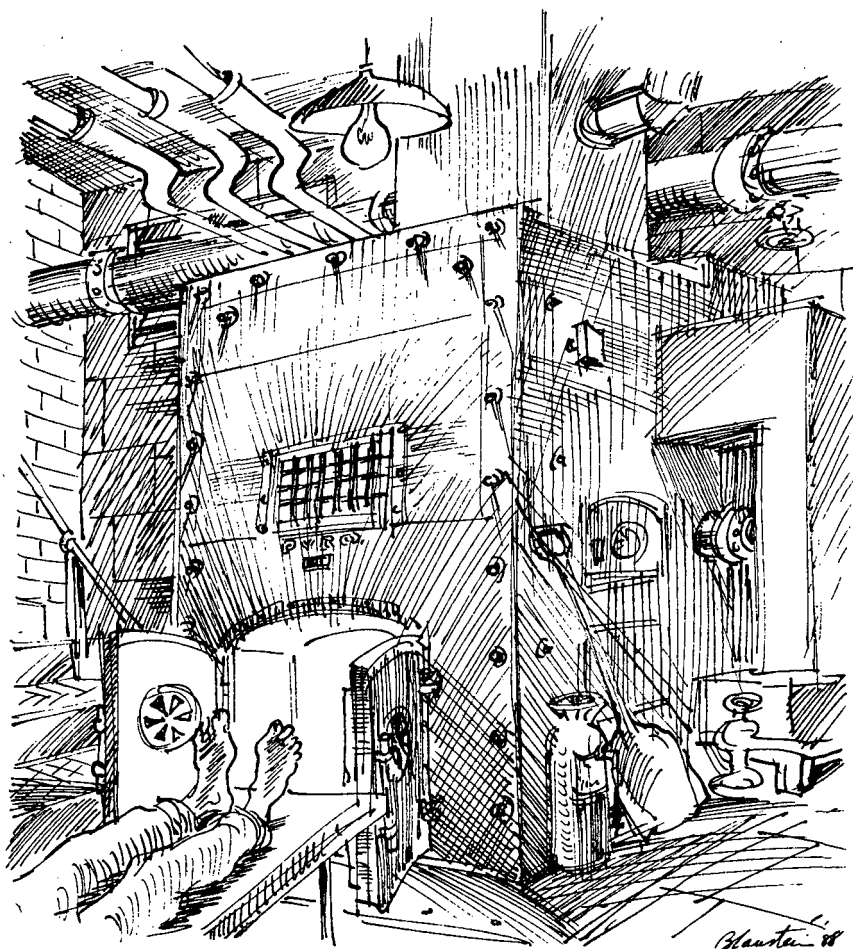


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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The janitor never did like the incinerator, so it was a bit of poetic justice when they found him in it Monday morning. Nobody had seen him since the previous Friday, at least that was what the police told us. Certainly none of the tenants had seen him since then. On Saturday the boiler had gone out, and we had looked all over for him. Not that it was so bad in April, not anything like the previous January when we'd been without heat for eight straight days during a cold snap, but still it would have been nice to have hot water for a shower and maybe to wash the dishes.

As I said, we looked everywhere for him, that is, everywhere a living man might have been. We knocked on the door of his room in the basement; we combed the building, all five stories and basement; we went back and banged on the door of his room; we went outside into the airshaft, and Jerry Delgado, the chairman of the tenants' committee, hopped on the shoulders of her husband, Al, and peeked through the window of the room. No janitor. Jerry went over to see his estranged wife, who runs a building two blocks away. His wife hadn't seen him since Friday, but she said he'd been drunk then, so Al went out to check Riverside Park and I went up

to Flynn's. He wasn't in the park, and he hadn't been in Flynn's since Friday.

We gave up, and Jerry called the management. They didn't want to talk to us, as usual, so Jerry called our lawyer, who called the president of the management company at home. They're friends, and so, bright and early Monday morning, we got a substitute janitor. He re-fired the boiler and pattered around a little and then noticed the incinerator was out and opened the door to re-fire it. Then he called the cops.

The cops got there about twenty of nine, which is just about the peak time for people to leave for work. As the working residents came hustling out onto the street, they encountered a little delay, consisting of proof of identity, proof of residence, apartment number, telephone number, and a few questions, like when they'd last seen the janitor. After most of the gainfully employed had gotten off, the coppers started through the building. They rode up in the elevator to the top and worked their way down, taking their time, so they reached me on the second floor close to eleven o'clock. I had just gotten up and was marveling at my first shower in three days when they knocked on the door. I was a little annoyed until they told

me what had happened to the janitor. I invited them in and gave them some coffee. I told them they'd probably heard it all from Jerry up on five—Jerry, I might add, is a housewife in her late twenties who likes to read about the French Revolution—they said they probably had heard it all from Jerry, but they'd like to hear it all from me just the same. So I told them. They took notes, thanked me for the coffee, and left.

Several hours passed before the next knock on my door. I should explain a little about people knocking on my door. I have a doorbell. It broke. I've been waiting for it to be fixed for eighteen months. In the meantime, people knock; but the problem is that when I'm sitting in the living room I can't tell if they're knocking on my door or my neighbor's door. By the corridor, it is sixty-two feet from my front door to my living room. So, sometimes I go and it's for the neighbor, and sometimes I go and it's for me, and sometimes it's just an automobile accident up on Broadway.

This time it was for me. I knew he was a detective the moment I opened the door. Most detectives in our fair city don't look like detectives any more. Some look like junkies, some look like car thieves, a good many look like stockbrokers in

their late thirties. This guy, though, was over forty, fat, in a rumpled gray suit, with a tie that was too narrow and a hat-rim that was too wide. The bulge under his left arm was big enough to advertise a trench mortar, and when he went into his hip pocket I thought he was going to come up with a black-jack. He came up with a well-beaten wallet instead. He held the wallet, eyeing me, and spoke.

"Mr. Casey? James Casey?"

"Yes."

He opened his wallet and showed me some identification. "The name is Edwards, Mr. Casey. Walter Edwards. I'm a private investigator, looking into the death of Mr. Hector Moore, your janitor here."

I held out my hand to his wallet. "May I?"

"Certainly. You can't be too careful these days, Mr. Casey." He handed it over. I read the identifications, which seemed to authorize him to carry a pistol and drive a cab in the city, and to snoop around from here to Spokane. I backed from the door and held out his wallet.

"Won't you come in, please, Mr. Edwards?"

"Thank you." He took his wallet and, resettling it on his hip, eased through the door. I closed the door after him and bolted it.

"Why don't we sit in the living room, Mr. Edwards? At the end of the corridor."

"Suits me." Mr. Edwards lumbered down the corridor, which is two feet, ten inches wide. He just made it with his shoulders square. I followed him into the living room. He settled carefully into the sofa, as if uncertain it would hold his weight. Then, as he looked the room over, he produced a Chesterfield King and lit up. I sat down in my armchair. He eyed the room a little more, and then he eyed me. Then he spoke.

"Well, Casey, I don't want to take too much of your time, so—to business. Why don't you begin when the hot water went out and take me through the police visiting you this morning."

"Before I do, do you mind if I ask who you're working for?"

He thought for a moment. "No. His wife."

I'm afraid I raised my eyebrows, which put him one up in the little deadpan game we were playing.

"That surprise you?"

"Well, I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd hired a brass band, but a detective . . ."

"The firm did some work for her a couple of years back, when her boy ran away. Personally, I just think she has detectives on the brain. But it's a

job. And maybe she's right. The coppers don't look any too happy about this one, and another gumshoe or two probably can't hurt."

I shrugged. "Suits me. I haven't had this much company in months." I began when Jerry knocked on my door Saturday afternoon, and finished with the police getting me out of the shower. During the recital he didn't say anything. He just lay back in the sofa and watched me through a cloud of cigarette smoke, which he augmented occasionally by taking another drag. When I had finished, he just sat there watching me. I gathered he was thinking, so I kept quiet. After a while he spoke.

"Was Flynn's the only bar he went to?"

"It was the only one that would still give him credit."

"Did he do a lot of private drinking?"

"Some. He wasn't really a drunk, you know. He had his happy hour every day, and then occasionally he'd go off on benders."

"How long did these benders last?"

"Couple of days, usually. That was all he could afford. They'd almost always start on payday. By the way, Friday wasn't a payday."

He thought about that one

for a moment. So did I.

"How often did he go off on these benders?"

"Maybe once or twice a month. But it was irregular. He had his straight months."

He eyed me silently for a while. Then he spoke. "Look, Casey. Everybody I've talked to in this building says that you were tighter with Hector than anyone else was. Now, the bartender at Flynn's says he came in just after five on Friday, did seven dollars and ten cents' worth of drinking on the cuff, and left about half past eight. His wife says he showed up at her place just short of nine and wanted to have conjugal relations. She says he wasn't too steady on his pins, so she let him sit for a minute before she threw him out. A little after nine. After that, nothing. A blank. Now, Casey, where the hell would he have gone?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Well, if he had a lot of money, he could have gone anywhere. Once he called me from Brooklyn and asked me to step over for a drink. If he had just a little money he would have gotten a bottle or two and come back to his room downstairs. His drinking on the cuff at Flynn's doesn't mean he didn't have anything in his pocket. On the other hand, if he really was broke, he could have pushed his

credit at Flynn's for another couple of dollars. Or he could have come here. I owed him a couple of drinks."

"Did he come here?"

"No."

"When did you see him last?"

"As I told the police, Friday morning. I was doing my laundry, in the laundry room in the basement. He was mopping down the hallway. He was sober."

Mr. Edwards stubbed out his cigarette and lit a new one. "Why did Mr. Delgado go looking for him in the park?"

"Because on Saturday afternoons, in good weather, Hector would often sit on a park bench and drink."

Mr. Edwards nodded and thought a moment, the cigarette on his lip.

"Do you mind if I ask you some personal questions, Mr. Casey?"

"Ask them, and I'll tell you."

"I find that being nosy about everything pays off just often enough to make it worthwhile." He looked at me questioningly. I shrugged.

"Why were you so tight with Hector?"

I thought for a while before I spoke. "Well, he was born in Georgia. So was I. Then again, the sink here tends to plug up a lot. And he wasn't a bad guy to have a couple of drinks with.

We weren't all that tight, you know."

"Had he been drinking more, recently?"

"Probably, but it would be marginal. Hector Moore was a pathetic man in many ways, but he was a man. He carried a lot of burdens, and he did it with what I consider remarkably little help, either from a bottle or from his fellow man."

He thought about that for a while. Then he spoke. "For a guy who can say that about Hector, you don't seem to be taking his death too hard."

"I only let these things in a little at a time." He had been watching me steadily now for more than a quarter of an hour, and it was getting on my nerves. He spoke again.

"I gather you're unemployed, Casey?"

"As I told the police, I used to work for the city. Now I collect unemployment. I didn't kill Hector for his money, if that's what you're thinking."

Mr. Edwards smiled ever so slightly. "What did you do for the city?"

"Mostly I worried, especially towards the end."

"And what do you do now?"

"As little as possible."

The smile increased a notch and hardened a bit. Mr. Edwards took a drag on his cigarette and allowed his face to

collapse back to impassivity verging on a scowl. I gathered that was his favorite thinking expression. I let him think. After a while, he hunched forward, stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the coffee table, and stood up.

"Well, Casey, thanks for the talk. I still can't put a handle on this case, but then neither can the coppers." He paused. "Say, I may have some more questions sometime. You wouldn't mind if I came back, would you?"

"No, no, certainly not." I stood up and we started for the front door, with him leading. "After all, if you don't know what you're doing, you've got to flail around, right?" His broad back made no reply to that one.

About halfway down the corridor something came to me. "By the way, are they sure it was Hector?"

"The body was only partially burned before the incinerator went out. There aren't any prints, and his wife can't identify him, but they think they can get a positive make from dental records."

"Hector went to the dentist?" I asked as I opened the front door.

Mr. Edwards smiled his faint smile again. "Once, about ten years ago. I gather that was back when his wife was still

trying to improve him." He was outside the door and had turned to face me.

"Well, good hunting," I said.

"Thanks." He turned and walked away. I shut and locked the door.

I breathed deeply a couple of times, trying to think. I walked slowly back up the corridor to the living room and sat down in my chair. I sat there for a while, and then I got up and watched the traffic on Riverside Drive. It wasn't very interesting. After a while I went and got my keys and went upstairs to talk to Jerry.

It was getting dark when I got back to the apartment, so I poured myself a bourbon and went into the living room. I turned on the light by my chair, put Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* on the record player, and sat down. I stared over at the spot where Mr. Edwards had sat that afternoon, and I took a sip of my bourbon.

It was a comfortable enough room. My ex-wife had taken most of the good furniture, which I'd replaced with junk. She had, however, left me my chair, and she hadn't stolen too many of my books. She'd even been good enough to leave me the copy of *Human Sexual Response*, which had her name clearly written on the fly leaf.

I'd given it to her as an anniversary present.

I turned and looked out the window. The sun was just going down over the Jersey oil refineries, giving a particularly rich and multi-hued extravaganza this evening. I watched it sink, and hover, and become bulbous, and then suddenly dive. A few green streaks hung on the horizon. I watched a moment longer, and there was a knock on the door. I ignored it. There was another and more persistent knock. I decided I might as well answer it.

I walked down the sixty-two feet of corridor to the front door, unlocked the door, and pulled it open. There stood Rita, her arms full of groceries.

I suppose I should explain about Rita. I had met Rita several months previously, at one of those cocktail parties where most of the people smoke dope and where it's not very hard to get laid. I found myself passing Rita a joint, and pretty soon she was passing me her line, which went like this: She'd studied sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design, taught crafts to third graders for a while, then married a banker. One evening, after about three years of what passes for connubial bliss these days, she put on her oldest pair of bluejeans, threw her sculpting tools into a Mark

Cross suitcase, and walked out. She remembered to pack her checkbook though—I managed to get that out of her, and also the repeated and vehement affirmation of her desire never to remarry, just so she could continue to stick her ex with the alimony payments. Naturally, I didn't believe a word she said, but she was a good looking and intelligent, so I brought her back to my place. Later, I found out we had some mutual acquaintances, and they said the line was pretty much the truth. Nobody had ever figured out why she'd married the poor bastard, or, again, why she'd left. The best Rita could do about the marriage was that he'd asked her, and it had seemed like the thing to do at the time. About her reasons for leaving, she had a stock collection of Anglo-Saxonisms, which were pretty imaginative for a woman. Anyway, after that first night, Rita took to popping in for dinner and the evening once or twice a week, unannounced of course. That's Rita.

"Well, invite me in, why don't you?"

I stood aside. As she walked past me, she slipped in an appraising glance. I was locking the door when she proffered her tentative diagnosis.

"Well, Jamie my boy, you're looking even more catatonic

than usual. You gone on downers, or just given up sleeping again?"

"Neither." I pointed down the hall. She preceded me down thirty feet of corridor and into the kitchen, dumping her grocery bags on the kitchen table. I flicked on the light and poked through the groceries. She had brought two steaks, which made it five times in a row. Rita knew perfectly well that she only had to bring meat for herself, and such an obvious display of nesting behavior was beginning to worry me.

"I've already defrosted a steak. I guess we can freeze one of these."

Rita grinned mischievously. "Why not eat it all?"

"Because I'm not hungry, and neither are you."

I picked up one of her steaks and put it in the freezer. Then I made Rita a bourbon and freshened mine while she unpacked the salad makings and gave me short appraising glances. Being appraised by Rita is like being put under a microscope. I handed her her drink and she spoke.

"Mr. Casey, what is troubling you?"

I caught her eyes and held them. "Somebody went and killed Hector."

I had not thought it possible to shock Rita. I was wrong. But

then, she'd liked him too. She didn't kick or scream or anything. She didn't even move. She was just sorry. After a few seconds she lowered her eyes to my arm and ran an index finger down the biceps muscle a couple of times. It was one of her major humane gestures—sort of like knocking on somebody's door, but quietly.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"That makes you a charter member of a very small club."

She put her drink down on the kitchen table and started pulling the lettuce apart—slowly, efficiently, gently. I put down my drink and went over to the stove and lit the oven. Then I asked her,

"Shall we have some wine with dinner?"

"You know the bourbon kills your palate."

"I wasn't thinking about my palate."

She looked up at me and smiled a smile of compounded sympathy, bravery, and just a little bit of the mockery that almost never left her, that was her shield.

"Why not?"

I went to the cabinet that served me as wine cellar, hoisted out a cheap bottle, uncorked it, carried it into the dining room, and placed it in the center of the table. As I got back to the kitchen Rita was just closing

the broiler door on the steaks.

"That's *my* job," I said.

She glared at me. "Big deal. You didn't look like you were about to get to it." She took down my spice rack and got the vinegar and an egg and started making the salad dressing. The spice rack had been a present from her to me.

"How was Hector killed?"

"I think they're still working on that. They found him in the incinerator."

She raised an eyebrow. "That must have been pretty."

"I wouldn't know. I didn't take the tour."

She thought for a moment. "Are they sure it's him?"

"Pretty sure. They're trying to get a positive identification from his teeth."

Rita raised both eyebrows.

"Yes. Evidently he does have dental records."

"There must have been a lot of men in blue around here."

"Yes, and detectives too."

She looked over at me. "They question you?"

"Yup."

She went back to her salad dressing, a smile crinkling the edges of her eyes. "Ah, I know what's really got Jamie down. He's gone and worn himself out being polite to strangers all day."

"The coppers weren't so bad. It was the private dick

who came in the afternoon."

"What was the matter with him?"

"He thinks I did it."

Rita straightened up and looked at me. "You're kidding."

"Maybe I am, but he's not."

Rita snapped the cap on the dressing bottle and started shaking it. "What on earth would lead him to think that you killed Hector?"

"Well, he's working for Hector's wife. She's the logical primary suspect. I mean, most murders are committed by spouses of one sort or another. But not her. She's very cool. She's so innocent she's going to hire a private detective to find out who did kill Hector. And what's in it for the dick if he turns her up? I don't think she'd pay him for doing that. So, if the spouse is clear, a drinking buddy isn't a bad bet, especially if you can show a jury that the murderer and the murderee were both mean drunks who spent a lot of time drinking together. Besides, who else is there?"

Rita stopped shaking the salad dressing and shrugged. "It's a big city." She picked up the salad bowl in her free hand and headed for the dining room. I got some plates down and pulled some silver and napkins out of a drawer and carried the stack into the dining room.

"That's the whole point." We started setting the table.

"What's the whole point?"

"The cops are not going to investigate the whole world over the murder of one janitor. If they can find a possible motive, they'll look for opportunity. If they can find a probable opportunity, they'll look for a motive." I went to the kitchen for wine glasses. Rita watched me as I returned and continued. "They've established that he was drunk Friday night. It is known that when he was drunk he was often with me, and rarely with anyone else. *Ergo*, probable opportunity. Motives are easily fabricated."

The two of us walked back to the kitchen and retrieved our bourbons. I checked the steaks.

She said, "It's silly."

I thought about that for a while, closing the broiler door and standing up. Then I took a sip of bourbon and faced her.

"I agree. Homicide, and particularly first degree murder, is silly in the extreme. So, let's talk about something important, like how well you want your steak done tonight."

She smiled. "Oh, the rarer the better, I think."

"Good girl." I bent down and reopened the broiler. Rita handed me a platter and I dumped the steaks onto it. She carried them into the dining

room. I shut off the oven and followed her. She placed the steaks on the dining room table and sat, vaguely annoyed as she always was when I didn't hold her chair. She spoke.

"So, my fair-haired desperado, sit down and eat."

Dinner required a second bottle of wine. After dinner, I washed the dishes and Rita dried. Then we retired to the living room and settled down on the couch.

Things were just getting interesting when there was a knock on the door. I pulled back from Rita and opened my eyes. Rita opened her eyes. We watched each other, listening. There was another knock, louder than the last. I stood up, slipped into my shoes, and started putting on my shirt. Rita said, "If it's Jerry, I'll kill her."

Rita didn't like Jerry; but then Jerry didn't like Rita. They'd only met each other once, for five minutes. That had been enough.

I said, "You'd better get your clothes on, just in case."

I tucked in my shirt and buttoned my trousers on my way down the corridor. I opened the door. It was Walter Edwards, doing his best to smile.

"Evening, Casey. Sorry to disturb you."

"Well, Mr. Edwards." He didn't seem to have any cops with him, so I figured I wasn't for the slammer that minute. "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night . . ."

"How's that?" He looked a little puzzled.

"... stays this taxi-driving detective from the completion of his appointed rounds."

The puzzled smile took on just a bit of glare.

"Mr. Edwards, it's interesting to see you again. What may I do for you this evening?"

"Well, Casey, I'd like to talk to you about the Hector Moore killing."

"I thought we'd done that."

"There are a few new twists I'd like to go over with you."

I gave up. "Mr. Edwards, why don't you come in and have a drink?"

"Why, thank you, Casey, that's very nice of you."

I stood back and he lumbered through the door. I shut and locked it and preceded him down the corridor. Rita had even tied her shoelaces. She was sitting in a chair, reading a magazine. Edwards squeezed through the door after me.

"Rita, this is Walter Edwards, the detective I was telling you about." Rita looked up from the magazine and smiled. It was her angelic smile, the one that made you check both

her hands for a knife. "Mr. Edwards, Rita." Rita, still sitting, held out her hand.

"Mr. Edwards, what a pleasure to meet you after all the things that Jamie has been telling me about you."

Edwards moved right across the room to keep Rita's hand from hanging there empty too long. He grasped it as if it were a knife and he wasn't sure whether he had the handle or the blade. He rumbled gruffly, "I hope they were nice things he told you, ma'am."

I interrupted. "Scotch or bourbon, Mr. Edwards?"

He released Rita's hand and straightened up. "Bourbon."

"Ice? Water? Soda?"

"Ice."

I went to the kitchen and made three bourbons and carried them back to the living room. Mr. Edwards was in his old seat, smoking. His hat lay on the sofa beside him. As I entered, Rita switched from Edwards to me.

"Just imagine, dear, Mr. Edwards says his firm doesn't handle matrimonials—you know, divorce cases—and they still turn a profit every year."

"Not much of one, ma'am."

"They do it by chasing people who run away and try not to be found."

I handed round the drinks and sat down in my chair, hop-

ing vaguely that the banker's wife and the detective would both disappear. They didn't.

After a silent moment, Mr. Edwards spoke. "Ah, Casey, —ma'am, I'd like to apologize for disturbing your evening. I wouldn't have come by tonight, but I have something, and I think it may be important." He waited a minute, eyeing us. "First, I'd like to say, Casey, as you may have noticed, I didn't know quite what to make of you this afternoon." He waited. I didn't say anything. "So I called a guy I know. He called a guy he knows, and *he* called a guy who knew you. The word is you're all right. A little weird, but all right." He waited.

I spoke. "That's interesting. I made a phone call this afternoon, too. I called my lawyer." I smiled. He smiled. He looked over at Rita. Rita wasn't smiling. She spoke.

"Tell me, Mr. Edwards, has the medical examiner identified the body yet?"

"The teeth are Hector's."

"Poor Hector. How was he killed?"

"A blow with a blunt instrument fractured his skull. He may still just have been alive when he hit the incinerator, though." Mr. Edwards paused to let that piece of information sink in. Then he went on. "He seems to have been sapped

somewhere else, probably his room down in the basement. One of the tables from the laundry room has traces of his type blood and a few strands of his type hair. Whoever did it washed the table down, but it's plywood, you know. Also the wheels had been freshly oiled."

"They used the table to get him from his room to the incinerator?" I asked.

"Looks that way. The table's the right height, too. You could just slide him right in the incinerator door."

"Any prints in his room?"

"His. Yours."

"How the hell did they identify my prints so quickly?"

"The city. You were fingerprinted when you went to work down there, remember?"

"What about Hector's prints?"

"The army."

Rita spoke. "By the way, Mr. Edwards, did it ever occur to you that your client might be the culpable party?"

"Yes."

"But you don't think she is."

"She smells of a lot of things, but she doesn't smell of murder."

Rita and I looked at each other. We looked at Mr. Edwards. He watched us for a while, put out his cigarette, lit another one. Then he spoke.

"I've been in this business, off and on, for twenty-seven years.

At the police academy they teach investigative procedure. Twenty-seven years on the job educates your hunches. If she did it, the coppers'll nail her." He paused. "The cops will always go for the simple explanation."

He took a deep drag on his cigarette and then almost disappeared behind a cloud of smoke for a minute. I took a sip of my drink. Rita recrossed her legs. When the cloud of smoke cleared a little, Mr. Edwards spoke.

"Okay. This is what happened. His wife throws him out of her place a little after nine on Friday night. That's the last anybody admits to seeing him alive. Sometime between then and Monday morning Hector gets it. Everything points to Friday night or early Saturday morning—the boiler going off Saturday and no Hector, the amount of trash in the incinerator with him. The medical examiner may be able to help us on time of death, but he says performing an autopsy on Hector is a lot like performing an autopsy on a charcoal broiled steak—most of the usual tests don't work.

"Let's say he conks out before the boiler does. I don't think time of death is the key to this anyway. Now, Hector was very drunk, drunker, I gather, than

he usually got. Somebody sapped him, and meant to kill him doing it. Possibly it happened in his room, probably in the basement somewhere. Maybe it happened in Jersey City. I don't think so, but I don't think it makes too much difference. Whoever put Hector in that incinerator knew this building, where to find lubricating oil or brought it with him, and was not scared of incinerators. Maybe he knows incinerators, maybe he doesn't know enough to be scared. That all of Hector did not go up the chimney was bad luck, but whoever did it knew enough not to go back to the incinerator room under any circumstances. Okay, what have we got? The man who owns Flynn's could have had him killed in Jersey City on Sunday for not paying his bar bill, and then had him planted here to make it look like an inside job. I don't think that's what happened. I think we've got three things.

"I think it was an inside job. I think whoever did it knew Hector well enough for Hector to let him in his room late at night. I think whoever did it not only knew the building but knew it well. Look, a tour of that basement would find you the incinerator room and the laundry room in under three minutes. A torpedo from Jersey City could have put Hector in

the incinerator, but he didn't. A torpedo from Jersey City would have belted Hector once more to make sure he was dead. Then he would have set his blunt instrument down by the body, straightened up, and walked out. Whoever killed Hector was at home in that basement. Okay, that's number one. It was inside.

"Number two: it was improvised. Whoever did it was good. The cops haven't found the weapon yet. And he almost got rid of the *corpus delicti*. Anybody that good, if he'd had time for planning, could have had everybody believing that Hector had gone on a round the world cruise and defected to the Chicoms in Hong Kong. It was a pick-up operation—a good one, but a pick-up.

"Okay—number three. Whoever did it is a very scary person. He's got a very strong stomach, and a very sick mind."

Mr. Edwards stubbed out his cigarette and lit another one, glancing from Rita to me and back again, evidently pondering his next words. Rita spoke first.

"What about the odor of burning flesh? Shouldn't somebody have smelled Hector?"

"Maybe. But at three o'clock in the morning, when he's going up with the chicken wings and the kitty litter?"

Rita shrugged. I took a sip of

my drink. Mr. Edwards continued.

"Okay, that's the how, and a little bit of the who. And now the reason for my visit, which I hope will give us some of the why." He put his cigarette in the ashtray and reached into his inside coat pocket, the one on the other side from his pistol. He pulled out a small, battered manila envelope that had the flap on the short end, pulled up the metal butterfly wings, and slid the contents of the envelope out onto the coffee table. The object appeared to be a gold pocket watch. After a moment Rita spoke.

"What a lovely clock."

Mr. Edwards picked up his cigarette and took a puff. "Casey?"

I got out of my chair and went over to the coffee table. I looked at the watch. "It looks like Hector's gold pocket watch."

"Why would you say that?"

I looked at Mr. Edwards. He looked like he was having fun conducting his little seminar. "Hector used to pawn it to me when he was short of cash."

Rita got up and came over and looked down at the watch. "I didn't know Hector had such a lovely watch."

"It was his father's."

Edwards stubbed out his cigarette. "Tell me, Casey, how much did you give him for it when he pawned it with you?"

"Twenty. It's all he ever asked for."

Edwards reached down and picked up the watch. He looked at it thoughtfully. "His wife gave him eight."

"She may not smell of murder, but she stinks of larceny. It's worth five hundred."

"How do you know?" He shifted his gaze from the watch to me, going from thoughtfulness to cautious interrogation.

"I had it appraised once during one of its visits. He always redeemed it on payday. When did he pawn it to his wife?"

"She says around nine o'clock Friday night." Edwards opened the cover of the watch, revealing its face. "Casey, do you have any idea why this note should be in here?"

He held the watch out to me. I took it. Stuck on the inside of the cover was a roundish piece of paper, not torn, but cut. On it was written one word—Delgado—in a large hand. I peeked under the paper. The photograph of Hector's wife was still there. I looked at Mr. Edwards and spoke.

"I haven't the faintest idea."

Edwards spoke. "Is that Hector's handwriting?"

"I don't believe I ever saw Hector write anything. Why does his wife say he pawned it with her instead of me?"

"I didn't ask her. I didn't know you were his pawnbroker."

You have no idea why the name Delgado is on that piece of paper."

"No. You might ask the Delgados, in 5C." I handed the watch back to him.

"I intend to do just that. I thought I'd come here first, though."

He was looking at me, not unkindly. I felt sorry for the Delgados.

"I wish I could help you," I said.

"You already have. Before you I only had my client's word to go on." We watched each other for a moment. Then he put the watch in his pocket, picked up his hat, and hoisted himself to his feet.

"You haven't finished your drink," I said.

"Thanks for it all the same." He put his hat on his head.

"Well, let me see you out." I stood up. Edwards hesitated for a moment, then spoke to Rita.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

Rita looked at him a bit wistfully. "Good night, Mr. Edwards. You know, we liked Hector around here."

"I've gathered, ma'am."

He nodded in her direction and went out the door. I followed him down the hall. I got the door open and, as he passed through, I said,

"Good luck."

He stopped for a minute and

looked at me, a vague smile on his face. "Thanks, Casey." He paused, evidently thinking. "You know, my jeweler only appraised it at four hundred. He said some parts were worn."

I thought about that for a minute. "Mr. Edwards, how long have you had that watch?"

"Let's just say she gave it to me and I brought it by here on my way downtown."

I raised an eyebrow. He nodded and walked off. I shut the door and returned to the living room. Rita had her magazine open in her lap again. She looked up as I came in.

"The laundry table points to Hector's wife, doesn't it?"

I sat down in my armchair and picked up my bourbon. "Not really. She's a lot stronger than I am. But I expect that even she would have needed the laundry table. Hoisting Hector from the floor to the incinerator would have been a very hard thing to do."

She waited a minute. I took a sip of the bourbon. She spoke.

"Well, do you think you're still number one on his list?"

I looked at her, a little wearily. Then I examined my glass. "He got that watch this morning, when Mrs. Moore hired him. He just told me he had a jeweler take it apart and go over it with a fine-tooth comb. He doesn't want the Delgados

because they don't strike him as killers, and besides, they have pretty good alibis for most of the weekend. He'll use that piece of paper to try to push them into giving him something on me. That's what he just pulled in reverse here."

"Did he get anything?"

"Yes. I played a tighter hand than an honest man would have."

"I think you're paranoid."

"There is such a thing as justified paranoia."

To my considerable surprise, Walter left me in peace all night. He didn't call until nine o'clock the next morning. I was still asleep when the phone first rang, and I had no intention of answering it, so Rita finally reached over and picked up the receiver.

"Hello . . ." After a bit she smiled weakly and turned to me. "Guess who?"

"Walter Edwards."

"Bingo." She handed me the receiver.

"Good morning, Mr. Edwards."

"Hi, Casey. Guess why the Delgado name was in Hector Moore's watch."

"I give up."

"Because he was working for them. Your neighbors have been running a bloody underground railroad for political fugitives.

Some of these people would spend weeks living in the Delgado apartment, and once he mentioned that he thought he ought to report the lease violation to the landlord. They hired him to help with the luggage and keep an eye out for strangers. Ten bucks a month."

"I don't think Hector ever got a decent day's pay in his life."

"Yeah. Anyway, he'd carry that piece of paper in his watch when he was on duty. It seems he had a habit of checking his watch before he'd go off and do something irresponsible, and the note was his way to remind himself to stay on the job and earn his money."

"You got all this from the Delgados?"

"Those are two tough cookies, Casey. They only told us about Hector to get out of the murder rap, after we'd spliced together the railroad story."

"If they didn't tell you about the railroad, who did?"

"The files. Mostly New York P.D., some F.B.I. But it was the F.B.I. stuff that gave us the links."

"I see. What are you charging them with?"

"Nobody seems to know just yet. We've had them down here since two o'clock this morning, and I think everybody wants to go home and get some sleep before they do the paperwork."

"By the way, Walter."

"Yeah."

"Did you figure out who killed Hector?"

"Not yet, Casey. We've been too busy running down this other angle."

"Do you still think I did it?"

"Yes. But that's not your main worry right now."

"I have a bigger worry?"

"Yeah. The F.B.I. They're happy about turning up this railway, but what they're really interested in is the counterintelligence angle. That's what Uncle Sam will really turn his pockets out for. They want the pipeline for the Communist money that pays for the operation. Do you remember where you were between July 12th and July 17th, three years ago?"

I thought for a while. "Here?"

"No. Algiers."

"Oh. I thought that was four years ago."

"Nope. When they tied you into Algiers, you could almost hear cash registers ringing around here. You were a natural, being so tight with the Delgados."

"Oh, well. How are the Delgados bearing up?"

"When we showed them what we had on them, I think they really wanted to call the Supreme Court and talk about the right to privacy, but other than that they seemed all right."

Just then there was a knock

on the front door. My bedroom is right next to the front door, so there was no possibility of a mistake. I looked at Rita. She looked at me, then got out of bed, slipped on my robe, and left the room.

"Say, Walter, I guess the F.B.I. will be coming by to talk to me?"

"I expect so, Casey."

"Is this the residence of Mr. James Casey?" The voice came from the hallway.

"Yes, it is."

"Is he in?"

"Yes, he is."

"Well, Walter, I think I have to go, because I think they're here."

"May we speak with him?"

"Well, Casey, good luck."

"Who shall I say is calling on him?"

"We'd rather tell him that, if you don't mind."

"Say, Walter, will you do me a favor?"

"What is it?"

"If it turns out that I didn't kill Hector, will you call me up and tell me who did?"

"Sure thing, Casey."

"Thanks. Keep healthy."

Rita was standing in the door.

"Same to you, Casey. 'Bye now."

"Bye-bye, Walter."

I hung up. Rita spoke. "Jamie, there are three men at the door who would like to talk to

you."

"The F.B.I., my dear."

"They look a lot like that, yes."

"I suppose we'd better let them in. Put them in the living room, will you? And make some coffee. I'll be there in a minute."

Rita nodded and went out, pulling the bedroom door shut behind her. I lay on the bed, trying to relax the muscles in the small of my back and prepare myself for the F.B.I. I heard the chain lock slide on the front door, and then the front door swing open. About the time it hit the wall, the bedroom door flew open and two large men with drawn pistols entered. I put my hands in plain view and then I didn't move. The larger man, dressed in a gray suit, continued to point his pistol at me. It was an army service automatic. The smaller man glanced over the room, moved to the closet, threw the door open, and held his pistol, which looked like a .38 police special, on my wardrobe and a few of Rita's blouses. He poked around in the closet a bit, then closed the door and turned to me.

"Would you gentlemen be from the Federal Bureau of Investigation?" I asked.

"Shut up," said the smaller one, who was wearing a tan suit with a vest. He advanced and the two of them had me neatly flanked, one standing on each

side of the foot of my bed.

"Firearms make me nervous," I said.

"Tough," said the big man with the automatic.

"But if you really want to scare me, you should take that automatic off safety."

The big man didn't blink. He took the automatic off safety and cocked the hammer.

"All right, I'm scared. What do you want?"

The smaller man advanced, sat down on the bed, and placed the muzzle of his revolver in my ear. "Okay, scumbag, who do you work for—the Commies or the C.I.A.?"

The F.B.I. didn't have much luck turning me into an espionage agent.

Then again, Walter Edwards and the police did manage to come up with a fall guy in the Hector Moore killing. It didn't take them very long. It was around noon the next day when my phone rang. I picked up the receiver in the living room.

"Hello?"

"Damnation, Casey. Guess who just got arrested?" It was Walter Edwards.

"Not me, I gather."

"No, Hector's wife."

"How did it happen?"

"Ah, they were going over her telephone records, and they found this one number in New-

ark that she'd called at least once a day for the last six months. Newark P.D. talked to the guy—it turns out he and Mrs. Moore were planning on getting married. He says she said she was going to divorce Hector."

"But Hector had been asking her for a divorce every week for the last ten years. She always said, 'What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.'"

"Till death do us part, Casey."

"Oh. Long on the marriage ceremony, short on the Ten Commandments."

"Yeah. It looks that way. She wouldn't be the first person to kill her way out of an unhappy marriage."

"Any proof?"

"They're hoping for a confession."

"Are they going to get one?"

"Well, they advised her of her rights an hour ago, and she just clammed up. Wouldn't say another word."

"That doesn't sound very promising. They find the murder weapon?"

"No."

"Have they got any witnesses?"

"No."

"That's what I call fancy police work."

"She had motive, Casey, and she had opportunity. She was

the last person to see him alive that we know of, and she was his spouse. If you ask me, when he came over Friday she told him he could have a divorce, and he pawned his watch so he could celebrate. Then she went over to his room later and sapped him in his sleep. She had a key, you know."

"They'll never get a conviction."

"Not with what they have now, but you'd be surprised what may turn up between now and the trial."

"I was happier not knowing how the police work."

"Most people are, Casey. How does it feel to be in the clear?"

"I don't think I am." I thought for a moment. "Drop by sometime and have a drink, Walter."

"I'll do that, Casey. As a matter of fact, I think I'd better keep an eye on you. The F.B.I.'s bound to try to stick you with something you didn't do."

"Thanks a lot, Walter."

"Well, I've got to go, Casey."

"Thanks again for calling, Walter. See you."

"Yeah, see you. 'Bye."

I hung up, then stood up and walked down the corridor to the bedroom. Rita was lying on the bed reading. She looked up. I spoke. "Hello."

"Hello."

"They've decided to nail it on Hector's wife."

"Why did they settle on her?"

"It seems she did it."

"How quaint."

"You want to go out to dinner tonight?"

"You're kidding."

"No."

"Well, then, certainly. Where?"

"I don't know yet. I have to think of a restaurant I like where I'm sure I won't run into any politicians."

"You want me to wear a dress?"

I thought about it. "Yes."

"I'll have to go home."

"I'll pick you up later. I have some things to do here."

"When?"

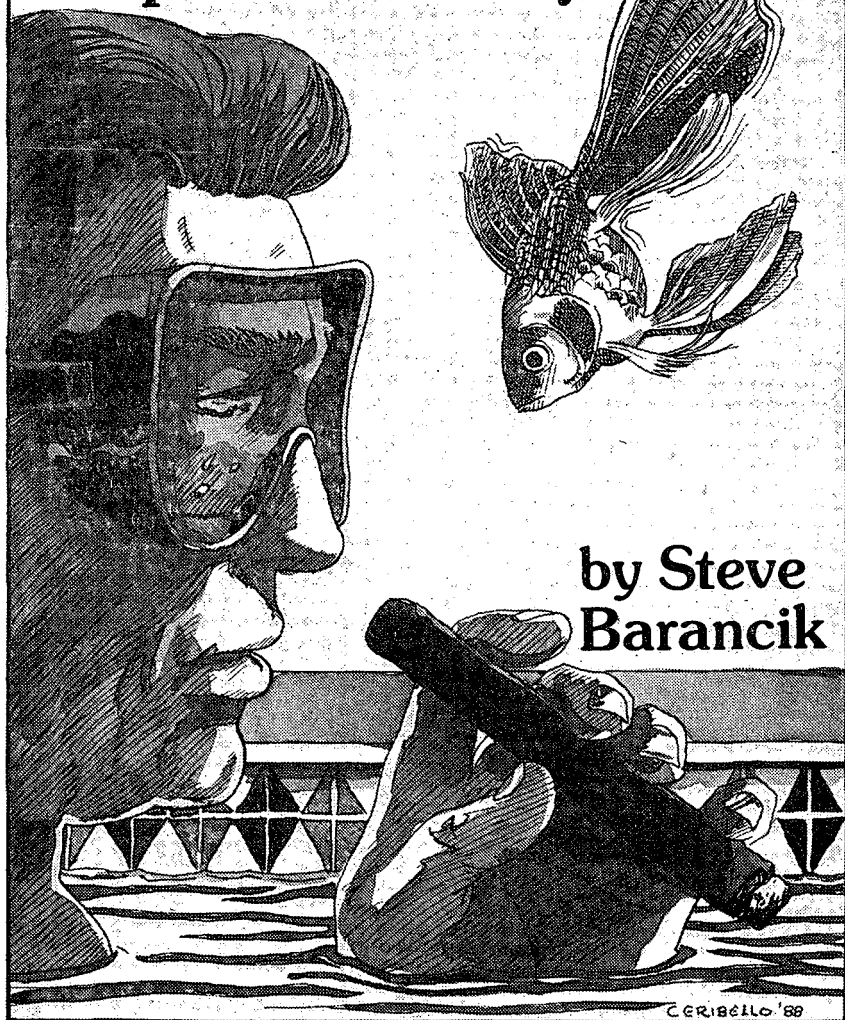
"About seven thirty."

"Fine."

She got up and put on her shoes and coat, and I showed her out the door. Then I went back to the living room and stared out the window for a couple of hours. When the sun started getting low I showered, shaved, and put on a suit. Then I poured brandy in two snifters and went to the living room window to watch the sunset. It wasn't very interesting, which meant that the air in Jersey was cleaner than usual. When the sun was down, I drained off both snifters, washed them and put them in the drying rack, and left the apartment.

FICTION

The Story of Captain Nobody



by Steve
Barancik

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

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Martin approached the old codger quietly. The child hoped his grandfather would be asleep; then he wouldn't have to ask his question. "Grampa?" he whispered.

The old man opened one wrinkled eyelid. "Hmmp?"

"Grampa, Dad said I should ask you for some advice."

The other eye opened, yet the man's expression stayed much the same, sadly, as the boy couldn't yet conceive of warmth without a smile. "Must be a real poser," said the old man. The child looked at him quizzically. "The question," explained his grandfather, "is your daddy too lazy or too dumb to answer it?"

The boy stifled a giggle. He hadn't gotten used to there being someone around the house who could insult his father and get away with it. "He said it was something you knew more about."

"Did he? Well, boy, that could be just about anything. What do you want to know?"

"We're doing a project in my class at school, and each of us has to work together with a partner. But my partner does everything, and he decides everything, and he takes the credit for everything. So I want to know what to do."

"Are you bigger than him?"

"No."

The old man opened his eyes

wide. "Are his ideas donkey doo-doo?"

The boy laughed openly despite his discomfort. "The teacher thinks his ideas are great. He gets all A's."

The old man snorted and nodded his head. "I think I know why your daddy sent you to me. Oughta spank his butt, but I know why he sent you. Tell you what, boy, I'll tell you a story. Hell, I could tell you fifty stories, but I've got a special one in mind because your father played a small but important part in it. We'll call it 'The Story of the Know-It-All Captain Who Found Murder Where Nobody Saw It and Got Your Granddaddy All Wet in the Process.' Can you remember that?"

"The Story of... Captain ... Nobody..."

"Stop right there," said the old man. "That's a title we can remember. The Story of Captain Nobody." The old man laughed a laugh from down deep, a laugh of saliva and smoking that came so suddenly it scared the boy almost as much as one of his father's sneezes. The laugh became a cough, and a minute went by before the old man could speak again. "Did you ever hear of Portnoy Weathers?" he asked.

The little boy cocked his head, trying to place the name.

"Of course you haven't," said the old man. "He's just the mayor of some deadbeat little town of three million or so upstate. No reason for you to have heard of him. Used to be a captain, and then the chief of police, in the little city where your daddy was born. But Mayor Portnoy Weathers is a doggone stupid-sounding name, so we'll just call him Captain Nobody, like you said. Okay, boy?"

The child nodded.

"Well, at one time, Captain Nobody was my captain on the police force. You knew your granddaddy was a policeman in his younger days, right, boy?"

"Yes, Grampa," the boy said, eyes barely blinking. His grandfather's having been a policeman was another reason he was so awed and terrified by the man.

"See, Captain Nobody had put himself on what people today would call the fast track. No job short of Ours Who Art in Heaven was high enough for him. He was always looking to move up, from captain to chief, from the small town to the big city. See? And Captain Nobody didn't much care about where he put his treadmarks while he was climbing. Why, I know a cranky old cop who got scuffed up for two years straight by Captain Nobody and never really recovered.

"Back when and where your daddy grew up, in Lincoln County, some towns had tennis courts, some towns had ice rinks, and some towns had ballfields—something, you see, for the young folks to make a name in. Our young made their name in pools, either plunging into them or pulling through them. We had a big Olympic size swimming pool—your dad was a pretty good swimmer, you know—and an Olympic diving board and ten meter platform, with a deep, deep diving pool down below, so you wouldn't crunch your head high diving. You've seen the Olympics, boy, can you picture it?" The boy nodded.

"At this time we had a hot-shot young girl diver in town, Sandra Stevens, and she was real good, bound for the Olympics. One morning a call comes in, she's been found floating face down in the diving pool. I was a lieutenant at the time, but Captain Nobody had me pegged as a secretary, on account of they have about the same amount of letters in 'em, I suppose. I followed him everywhere, and not by choice. We drove to the scene.

"The pools were indoors, and you had to walk through a locker room and a set of showers to reach them. Written in tape on the deck of the pools

was a sign that said, 'No street shoes allowed.' Captain Nobody took off his shoes and rolled up his pants, despite the fact that none of the investigating officers already there had taken their shoes off, and despite the fact that he continued to smoke his big, smelly cigar while sauntering past no fewer than five No Smoking signs. Wouldn't let me smoke, though, which contributed to my general irritation. Within a minute everybody on the deck had taken off their shoes, too. Including me.

"Have I told you what Captain Nobody looked like? Imagine a man five foot eight who could look six foot two when he wanted. Imagine a man who always walked around the office looking like he slept in his clothes, but—bring on the public or press—within seconds he could comb his hair, tuck in his shirt, and brush the ashes and powdered sugar off his face, and look like someone you'd want your daughter to date. And marry for that matter. The man even spoke differently when there was citizenry in the vicinity.

"Anyway, back to the scene. There's some press people there, on account of Miss Stevens was our most famous citizen of the time. He kicked them all out of the building on account of he didn't want any of their atten-

tion till he'd done something. I could hear Captain Nobody licking his chops.

"There's some uniforms there too, and they're practically crawling over each other to report the facts to Captain Nobody, who's already made a bit of a name for himself and is hated only by his fellow detectives. See, boy, there's a sort of unwritten rule among detectives that, when you're investigating a crime, leads and ideas are shared, and when you're done, so is the credit. Captain Nobody didn't much see it that way. I guess he figured there wasn't any getting ahead of people when you're tying your fortune to theirs. So the captain did all of his thinking to himself, with me standing by to write down anything he might not want to forget. The uniforms told us what they knew so far, and I wrote the facts down something like this.

"The body was found at eight thirty A.M., a half hour before opening, by the facility's maintenance man, who was just beginning his shift. The maintenance man cleaned the place and kept the pools in working condition. The dead girl, aged twenty, had a key to the facility, with approval of the park district, so that she could practice alone and in peace. She did so, generally,

from six to eight in the evenings.

"The coroner was already on the scene and had made some preliminary determinations, according to the uniforms, though he wouldn't put anything in writing until he'd had a chance to perform a full autopsy. She appeared to have died by drowning, he said, and there appeared to be no signs that she had been injured or knocked unconscious prior to her drowning. Am I talking over your head, boy?"

"You mean she didn't hit her head on the board and drown because of that, right?"

"That's right, boy. I also mean that there wasn't anybody hit her over the head intentionally, either. So those on the scene had concluded among themselves that the poor girl had had a cramp of some sort, and drowned because of that, panicking and all. I have to admit that sounded like the only possible conclusion to me. Captain Nobody walked over towards the coroner, who was still poking at the body, and I followed. The captain said, 'Coroner, what do you think we got here?' The coroner stood up and said, 'Well, captain, don't quote me on this, but it looks to me like we've got an accidental drowning.' The captain asked, 'How do you explain it?' and the coroner an-

swered, 'Figure she got a cramp.'

"Well, boy, have you ever told your daddy your version of something while he looked you in the eye, and then, when you'd finished, he kept looking? And looking. And you figure you better rethink it out or say something else or maybe just turn around and run, because he's neither happy nor satisfied with what you've said so far? I see you have. Well, that's the kind of look Captain Nobody gave the coroner right then. But the coroner just stood there and fidgeted some, because for the life of him he couldn't figure out what the captain wanted him to say. I sympathized because Captain Nobody had given me that look a number of times.

"Then the captain said, 'When you perform your autopsy, will you be able to tell me whether she had a cramp?' The coroner thought to himself a second, and you could tell he didn't like the answer he was going to give, but he gave it anyway because it was the only one he had. 'No,' he said. Then the captain looked at him some more. Finally he said, 'Coroner, being a policeman I like to know when somebody's died naturally and when somebody's been murdered. I could have come here myself, seen a girl floating face down in the water, and even if I couldn't have told you

for sure right away whether she was dead, I certainly could have left her floating and given you a goddamn *accurate* answer in about ten minutes or so. I expect a little more out of my coroner.'

"Well, the coroner just stood there looking at his feet and taking lumps, as if he actually was Captain Nobody's coroner and wasn't elected by the people. By this time every cop on the scene was paying attention. The captain spoke to the coroner again, but he clearly wanted everybody to hear what he was saying. 'We understand the girl was usually here between the hours of six and eight in the evening. If her drowning took place at another time, might we be reasonable in suspecting foul play?'

"All the cops murmured as if to say, 'Why didn't I think of that?' The coroner answered, 'Yes, I suppose you would be.' 'What was the time of death?' asked Captain Nobody. The coroner took a deep breath, then answered meekly, 'I don't know.' The captain practically looked a hole through him. 'Placing the time of death is a mathematical function,' mumbled the coroner, 'based on regular body temperature, the temperature of the body when found, and the temperature of the surrounding air. The func-

tion does not take into account the accelerated cooling caused by a liquid medium.'

"Well, the captain's face took on a look of total contempt and his eyes focused somewhere about ten feet behind and through those of the coroner. Then he turned to the uniforms. 'In the coroner's expert opinion,' he explained, 'the subject is dead.' Then Captain Nobody bent to examine the subject for himself, looking over her entire body, pausing only to examine more closely both of her hands—her fingers to be more exact. There appeared to be blue paint under the nails.

"Like I said before, Captain Nobody wasn't much for sharing his thoughts, but I could tell he didn't know where to go with this case. He got down on his hands and knees and examined the inside rim of the diving pool, just under the ledge, crawling all around it. It didn't look as if he found anything. Before he stood up he stuck his hand in the diving pool. He dipped a toe in the swimming pool, twice, then back in the diving pool. Then we settled in a little office which overlooked the deck. The captain sat back with his bare feet on the desk, sucking doubletime on his stinking stogie. Following orders, I brought in every park district employee, one at a time,

beginning with the maintenance person, a kid named Owen. The captain was fishing, digging for anything out of the ordinary, looking for evidence of a guilty conscience. If he got anything out of any of those interviews, I can't figure out what it was, though one employee, a secretary, was absent. When the interviews were over we sat for nearly an hour and a half—through lunch—him mumbling and me at attention. Finally he had me call the rest of the attending officers into the tiny office.

"Men," he said, "this thing smells an awful lot like murder. I have trouble believing a trained athlete, and no doubt a decent swimmer, could drown in a pool in which she could never be more than ten yards from a side. Still, I take the coroner's rather questionable word on the lack of physical injury to the body. I will even assume, for the sake of argument, that no foreign substances will be found in her bloodstream. But I will also assume that no evidence of heart attack or stroke will be found, and that no athlete like Miss Stevens could be felled to this extent by a mere muscle cramp. Let's us, together, consider the variables in the circumstances we're presented with, and see what combination could result in the—"

"Well, boy, strange as it was that Captain Nobody was soliciting the help of others, though not from his fellow detectives, mind you, it was probably inevitable that the phone would interrupt him at that very moment. In true form, he let it ring four times before answering it. To my overwhelming embarrassment it turned out to be your dear grandmother, bless her rest, having succeeded in tracking me down after a number of calls. 'Hello,' said the captain. 'Yes,' he said, raising his eyebrows and looking at me, his face a mask of mockery for the daily doings of the fairer sex. 'The lieutenant is standing right in front of me.' His voice seemed full of genuine concern, but I knew better. He motioned me to hand him my notebook. 'The lieutenant should pick up a new goldfish on the way home from work?' The officers in the room began to snicker, though I outranked them all, and Captain Nobody had drawn a little goldfish with X's for eyes on the pad in front of him. 'Yes, I hear the boy crying. What happened, dear lady? He filled the bowl up to the top, and . . .'

"A look of revelation crossed the captain's face as he abruptly hung up on your grandmother, an act for which I never forgave him and, ahem, for which I never took him to task.

He drew a picture of the fish-bowl and your daddy's goldfish swimming out. Then he began barking out orders. 'I want the current temperature of the diving pool. Find out how the pool is refilled when empty, and the temperature of the refill water as it comes out of the source. I want that maintenance man front and center in half an hour, and I want the police records of anyone who has worked here in the last year before that. And, lieutenant, requisition me a diving mask and a bathing suit.'

"Needless to say, none of us knew what the hell—excuse my French, boy—was going on. But we followed orders nonetheless. My job was to assign the chores that Captain Nobody had barked out, and to report back to him when they'd all been done. Of course it was me that would take the heat when it took five extra minutes to accumulate the police records. I knocked on the office door with the maintenance man at my side. 'About time,' growled the captain without looking up. 'Whaddya got?'

"I began to answer. 'The current temp—'

"Captain Nobody looked up, then shut me up with a glare and a traffic cop's signal to stop, though the captain had never worked a street beat in his life. 'Young man,' he said to the

maintenance fellow, 'what's your name, again?'

"'Owen,' answered the boy.

"'Owen,' said Captain Nobody, as polite and friendly as someone nice might have said it, 'have a seat. As far as you know, did Miss Stevens ever bring any friends with her when she practiced?'

"Owen thought for a second. 'Can't say as she did, sir, though I usually wasn't here when she was. She liked to practice after hours, you know.'

"'Yes, I know,' said Captain Nobody, who paused then for an uncomfortable length of time.

"Owen shifted his feet. 'You don't suspect me, do you, sir?'

"Captain Nobody leaned forward with what appeared to be intense curiosity. 'Why, son, do you think she was killed?'

"'Well, no, no, sir,' stammered Owen, 'it's just that I don't know why you called me in here a second time.'

"Captain Nobody put his big, ugly feet up on the desk and laughed heartily. 'We investigate accidental deaths, too, Owen. Why... you couldn't have killed her without emptying the whole pool out and her diving in without noticing. She wasn't blind, was she?' asked the captain, still laughing.

"'No, she wasn't,' answered Owen, smiling, trying to

get in the spirit of things.

"And you probably haven't drained the pool in, well, how long?" asked the captain, still giggling a little.

"About a week and a half ago," answered Owen, giggling along.

"Captain Nobody's face went hard. The lieutenant here is witnessing our discussion and taking down your statement," he said, indicating me. 'Do you swear that the last time you drained or partially drained the pool was a week and a half ago?'

"The kid looked at me, then looked back at the captain, obviously shaken by the change in mood. 'No. Yeah. I mean, yes, that's the truth.'

"What should the temperature of the diving pool be?" asked the captain.

"It's, um, temperature-controlled at seventy-six degrees."

"That's all for now, then," said Captain Nobody, dismissing Owen with a flick of his hand as he might a slave. 'Shut the door on your way out.' Owen did. 'You were saying?' said the captain to me.

"It took me a couple of seconds to get my thought train back. 'Uh, the current temperature of the diving pool is seventy-one degrees,' I answered. 'It's filled by means of a hose connected to a spigot that comes out over the swimming pool. The temperature as it comes

out of the hose is fifty-four degrees. As for police records of employees, the only one with anything besides a traffic ticket is the Owen kid, who seems to have a bit of temper. He's been picked up for fighting a couple of times, nothing else.'

"Did you get the swimsuit and mask?"

"Yes, captain," I answered.

"Well, Captain Nobody shoed me out the door and closed it behind me, proceeding to change. He came out a couple of minutes later looking like some sort of Martian, the mask over his eyes, the plaid swimsuit somehow clashing with his hairy body and hairless legs, and the ever-present cigar poking out of his mouth. I followed him as he walked towards the pool, everybody else's eyes also on him. Stopping there, he handed me the wet end of his cigar (he always kept a good half of it inside his mouth) and jumped into the diving pool. He spent most of the next five minutes under water, examining the walls of the pool below the surface. He pulled himself out over the edge of the pool, avoiding the ladder, and gestured for his cigar. He shot me a look of mild disgust when he discovered it had gone out.

"My office," mumbled Captain Nobody, referring to the poolside office he'd taken over. I followed him only to have the

door slammed in my face as he went in to change. When he finally told me to come in, he was dressed, his suit soaked through, with his wet bare feet back up on the desk.

"'Run Owen's name past the victim's parents,' he said. 'And make sure the kid doesn't leave in the meanwhile.'

"Well, I called Sandra's parents, not a pleasant task, and found out that Sandra had gone out on a few dates with Owen but had since told them not to tell Owen she was home when he called. I had to admit, given the curious circumstances of her death, Owen's newfound nervousness, and his apparent attachment to her, it was beginning to look like Sandra might have been murdered, and that Owen was a likely doer of the deed. But I hadn't seen one shred of evidence towards proving it. What were the pieces Captain Nobody seemed to be putting together?

"I reported what I had found out to Captain Nobody. 'Go see Owen,' he said, 'and tell him to empty the *swimming* pool three feet worth. Then have him remove the ladder in the deep end. Watch him so he doesn't bolt. Then inform him he's under arrest, read him his rights, and bring him up here to see me.'

"The captain turned away to dismiss me, but curiosity had

gotten the better of me, so I called on courage enough to ask him what he'd figured out and how. 'Owen killed the girl?' The captain nodded. 'How?' I asked. Captain Nobody raised one hairy eyebrow as if to say, 'I know, you don't, and that's the way it's going to stay until all the credit gets handed out.' 'Then why'd he do it?' I asked, hoping for some sort of response.

"'Don't know,' answered the captain, 'and I don't have time to figure it out. Dinner could get cold.' I gathered that what he really meant was that time was running out for his case-cracking to make the six o'clock news. I turned towards the door. 'If it'll please you,' said the captain, 'I'll ask him why he did it.' As if he wouldn't have anyway. I went to fetch Owen.

"Owen began shaking when I asked him to partly empty the swimming pool, and he practically started convulsing when I asked him to remove the ladder as the captain had ordered. When he finally finished, I read him his rights, then took him to the captain. I opened the door and walked in with Owen, but the captain said, 'Thank you, lieutenant, that will be all.' I closed the door behind me. Five minutes later the captain called me in. 'We need you to witness Owen's confession,' he said. 'Which I did, signing the writ-

ten statement. 'Send a uniform in to take him to the station. Then wait at the pool.'

"Within ten minutes a good thirty members of the local press—newspaper, TV, and whatever—had assembled poolside, having been alerted to a press conference concerning the *murder*, not the accidental death, of Sandra Stevens. A good half of the police force, both on duty and off, had also assembled. Captain Nobody's unveilings were always good show. When the captain emerged from the office, perfectly groomed I might add, the deck area quieted to the buzz and hiss of tape recorders, video cameras, and cops laying bets. The smart money had Captain Nobody making chief by year's end.

"Captain Nobody went over every step of his thinking process, except for the step your daddy and grandmother had a part in. Which, you should know, was the jolt to Captain Nobody's brain that knocked all the pieces into place. Now, I won't repeat his speech because to hear that much bragging would make a normal man blush. I'll just go over it in words of my own for you.

"See, the temperature of the pool should have been kept and held at seventy-six degrees. Remember? It was only seventy-

one at the time. Think, boy, what could make the temperature lower? If the heater broke? Yep, that's a good answer, but the heater was in perfect condition. Think about this. What if the pool had been emptied and refilled, it'd take the heater a while to heat up all that water, right? Remember, the water that came out of the spigot was only fifty-four degrees. So the captain figured someone had emptied the pool out some, that someone being Owen on account of he was the only person worked there who knew how. But Owen had said he hadn't. Only two reasons for him to deny it: if he actually hadn't, or if the question scared him and he were lying. Captain Nobody assumed he was lying, on account of that was the captain's natural tendency.

"But how do you kill someone by emptying a pool? Well, sure, if the victim doesn't notice it's empty and then dives into it, they'll be dead real soon. But that didn't happen because the coroner said there were no physical injuries. And besides, if Owen did it that way, the evidence would point right to him, right? And the coroner said the girl had drowned, so there must have been *some* water in the pool. Which means the pool was only partially emptied, then refilled. But the question still re-

mained, how do you kill somebody that way? I'll give you a hint. I can think of two things that people and goldfish have in common. The obvious one is that we can both swim. The important one is that neither of us can fly. Confused? I should probably let Captain Nobody take over from here.

"Imagine, if you will," he said, 'that the deep end of the swimming pool, everything on this side of the rope, represents the diving pool. The killer has lowered the level of the pool a few feet. He has also removed the pool ladder. Lieutenant,' Captain Nobody gestured towards me, 'could you come over here, please?'

"Well, boy, I was all embarrassed by the cameras, but I walked right into the glare and up to Captain Nobody. He took that slimy cigar out of his mouth and held it out to me. I reached out to take it from him, and, as I did, the captain's both hands pushed me into the deep end of the swimming pool. 'I'm afraid you owe me a cigar, lieutenant,' he called as all the reporters laughed and all the cameramen and photographers scurried to the edge of the pool to film me floundering. 'Lieutenant, kindly attempt to get out of the pool, without going into the shallow end.

"Imagine now," said the cap-

tain to the reporters, against a background of me, in full uniform, time and again trying to propel myself up to a height where I could grab the rim of the pool, 'that the lieutenant is the late Miss Stevens. She has just taken her first and final dive into the diving pool, not having noticed the relatively slight lowering of the water level or the absence of the ladder. Or perhaps she did notice these things, but it never occurred to her that they were the formula for her death.

"You see, one thing had bothered me from the beginning of my investigation, when I first saw the victim's body. There was paint, obviously from the pool walls, under her fingernails. If Miss Stevens could make it to the side of the pool, why didn't she simply pull herself out? Further investigation revealed that the scratchmarks left by Miss Stevens were below the present surface. The lowered level explains both the existence and location of these marks. Because Miss Stevens, as we watch the floundering lieutenant, would normally have had no problem pulling herself out over the side of the pool. But the lowered level keeps her from even reaching the edge, as you see, while the depth of the pool does not allow her to rest. Despite her excellent swim-

ming skills, she eventually drowned. The killer returned to the scene slightly before opening, refilled the pool to its normal level, and reattached the ladders. The only evidence he left behind was the lowered temperature of the water. Speaking of which, you can come out now, lieutenant. Thank you very much for your assistance.' I dogpaddled my way under the rope, out of camera range, into the shallow end and out of the pool. I stood there squeezing the water out of my clothes and shivering as Captain Nobody continued his explanation.

"Having determined the method of the murder, the identity of the killer was rather obvious. The only person with access to the facility and the knowledge necessary to perform the murder was the facility's maintenance person, a local man and, I determined, a jilted suitor of the victim. The victim, it seems, had threatened to cost him his job if he didn't discontinue his unwanted advances. He has signed a full confession. The clever and sinister method with which he performed the killing was gleaned from a newspaper article describing the accidental death of a youngster in a reservoir in another part of the state. Are there any questions?"

"There were lots of questions for old Portnoy, er, Captain Nobody, all designed to make him seem as much the hero and pride of our city as possible when the evening news clicked on and the next morning's papers flew off the press. Nobody asked the important question, which was, 'Captain, would you give up all the recognition you'll receive for solving this murder if you could just give the poor girl her life back?' Then again, I suppose that's the one he'll be answering come The Big Day in Court. Barely six months later old Captain Nobody was the chief of police. A couple of years after that he was hired away by the big city, and it wasn't long after that he became their mayor. Any questions?"

The boy, engrossed in the story, looked confused at its apparent ending. "Uh, that's a great story, Grampa. But what's the point?"

"The point? That's right, you asked me a question or something, didn't you, boy?"

"Yes, Grampa, I told you about my partner who's doing all the work and getting all the credit on our school project. You were going to give me some advice."

"And advice you'll get, boy. Did Captain Nobody remind you of your partner?"

"I guess he did in a way. He

did all the ordering around, he did all the thinking himself, and he got all the credit."

"That's right, boy. And what did your old grandfather do about it? Come on, boy, say it."

"Uh, you didn't do all that much, Grampa."

"You got it, boy, and that's all you can do. But don't make the mistake your Grampa made and get dandered about it. If there's one thing that you'll learn about the Captain Nobodys in this world, it's that they don't stay in one place for too long. They're always looking for new things to conquer, new people to impress, and new associates to annoy. Just take a couple of deep breaths, relax, and wait for him to roll over you. It won't take long, and it

don't hurt that much. Then pick yourself up, brush yourself off, and watch him run over the next guy. And enjoy it. If you don't do it that way, it'll hurt a bunch when he runs you over, and a bunch more each time you see him do it to someone else. And there's no happiness in that. You understand me?"

"I think so."

"What are you going to do about your partner?"

"I'm going to let him do all the work like he wants, and I'll settle for my half of the grade. And if he ever asks me to be his partner again, I'll tell him to go run over the next guy."

"Real good, boy, real good. Why, you know the Captain Nobodys of this world better than they know themselves!"

FICTION

The Geneva Games

by Robert Gray

“Carlyle . . . July 19, 2008 . . . Arrival . . .”

Ben pressed the tape recorder's pause button and stared through the plane's window. Three or four miles below, the

Swiss countryside was becoming more distinct as the plane descended.

He thought it might be nice to suspend time for a while; not go back down at all; circle in an infinite holding pattern. Not

likely, of course; not when there was work to do below and fuel being consumed above.

The plane continued to fall from the sky. Ben released the pause button.

"I have mixed feelings about this trip," he said, speaking quietly so he wouldn't be heard by the other passengers. Fortunately, the two seats beside him were unoccupied. "Switzerland is beautiful still, at least from the air, but I guess I won't see much more of it. The dangers inherent in foreign travel will prohibit my getting any closer to Geneva than the airport. There will be armed Olympic representatives there to whisk me away to their so-called Olympic Village. Maybe it's just as well. I haven't been here for thirty years, and the sight of armored trucks careening down quaint, deserted streets might be more than..."

He switched the machine off before things got sappy. The plane shuddered, which Ben decided was a natural reaction, all things considered. Why would anything, or anyone, return to the planet without a struggle these days.

"Day One continued. My room has a lot in common with my hosts. It is white, eminently functional,

and completely lacking in character."

He let the machine run on; let it record his breathing and the faint, cigarette induced wheeze he had picked up in recent years. He wondered whether the paper would let him give much ink to Jim Bradley in his column.

They had grown up in the newspaper business together, he and Jim; first meeting as baby-faced war correspondents in Vietnam half a century ago. World events had brought them together over the years: the Persian Gulf conflicts in the late eighties; the New York Food Riots in '96; so many others before and since. Their names had carried some weight a long time ago. Now they were vestigial ornaments, print media representatives in a video world.

In fact, they weren't even "they" any more. Jim was dead.

"Jim Bradley," Ben whispered into the tape recorder, then cleared his throat and spoke more clearly. "Jim Bradley arrived last week and died two days ago. He was a journalist. . . . Heart attack . . . Not many people will miss him. Our obituaries will be similarly inconsequential; page forty stuff. . . .

"Business . . . I was flown by helicopter directly to the Olym-

pic Village, and escorted to my quarters without delay. This is Jim's room, in fact. Some extra video people were already in mine. They gave me a press kit and also the one Jim had had, which contained some of his personal effects: wallet, watch, and such. No tape recorder and no notebooks, which naturally aroused my curiosity. No answers here, however; certainly not from my Sphinx-like hosts.

"From the air, the four cinder block buildings here look like the sun-bleached vertebrae of some long-dead animal. It is not unlike a prison; a Gulag, complete with barbed wire and electrified fencing. The beds are softer, however, and my hosts insist the security is not only for our safety, but to preserve the 'sanctity of the Games.' Guests are restricted to Building #2, except when escorted, by invitation only, elsewhere. I'll be touring the facilities tomorrow, I'm told. Each morning, the Olympic ambassadors hold press conferences in this building. I am also to get fifteen minutes sometime this week with the American ambassador."

Ben switched off the recorder. He wasn't in the mood. Although Jim had been gone for two days, the room still seemed full of him. Ben was not a spiritual or superstitious man, but it all made him uneasy.

Bradley had been more colleague than friend. Losing bits of the past, however, did not get easier with age.

Leaving his own press kit undisturbed, Ben unzipped Bradley's satchel—black leatherette with the Olympic symbol in gold—and dumped its contents on the coffee table. In addition to the usual array of computer-generated lists of statistics and athletes' biographies, there was a guidebook bound in the same material as the satchel. Ben opened it to the first page, which featured three quotations in wedding script with the title "Olympic Evolution":

"The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered, but to have fought well." (BARON DE COUBERTIN-1896)

"The corporations do play a significant task in financing the total effort. But the bulk of our contributions still come from the public. . . . We've only just begun to pursue the potential of corporate involvement." (F. DON MILLER, USOC-1979)

"The corporate franchising of events, together with a worldwide telecommunications net-

work, have led us to the threshold of a new era. Twenty-first century Olympic audiences now witness the physical accomplishments of athletes who are safe, subsidized, and supreme."

(WILLIAM JAMESON, U.S. AMBASSADOR-2002)

On the following page was a letter written by Jameson, since the United States was the official "host" of this year's Games. A similarly glowing tribute to corporate benevolence ended with the paragraph, "We have gathered together the cream of international communications systems, corporate philanthropy, and computer technology to monitor the triumphs and tragedies of these hearty young men and women. Let the Games begin!"

Jim Bradley had scribbled the word "Sisyphus!" in the margin beside both the Jameson quote and the letter. It was an angry scrawl, if Ben's handwriting analysis could be trusted. Ben smiled at his colleague's passionate, if brief, rebuttal.

Thumbing through the rest of the guidebook, he found a list of participating nations—Australia, Canada, France, England, West Germany/Austria, Japan, Scandinavia, and the U.S.

Eight teams now composed what had once been a global

contest. The Olympic Committee referred to the past twenty years as the "Golden Age of Olympic Competition," citing evidence like video ratings and broken records, not to mention the nearly equal distribution of medals among competing countries. Nobody went home a loser in these new, improved Games. Ben needed a drink.

He needed a cigarette, too, but smoking was forbidden except in the press lounge, where he was now. The lounge was crowded, but he expected to drink alone. Everyone in the room wore an official blazer in one of a rainbow of garish colors, depending on the network represented. The air buzzed with the dozens of separate languages being spoken simultaneously over cocktails. Except for the necessary once-over when he entered the room, no one paid any attention to him. Without a blazer, he couldn't be anyone worth knowing. Tweed just didn't cut it.

Ben ordered a scotch and carried it to the farthest corner of the room. Sitting on one of four molded plastic chairs around a molded plastic table, he sipped the scotch from a molded plastic cup.

Ben opened the guidebook and continued his studies. Media hype notwithstanding, the

Olympics were pretty shallow entertainment these days, he thought. The crowning blow had come eight years ago with the ban on foreign travel visas for athletes. Under the inadequate guise of protective custody, all Olympic athletes competed in their own countries, with the event results tabulated and the winners announced here in Geneva. There were no more team competitions like basketball or hockey. A few of the individual ones had disappeared as well, due to lack of sponsorship.

There was a commotion near the entrance as another herd of video people arrived. Ben watched them without interest until his attention was captured by the last two newcomers, who did not quite fit the prevailing mold.

The first was a man, about thirty years old, who wore a white shirt, leather vest, and brown corduroys. His companion, although in full video uniform—yellow blazer and dark blue skirt, blonde hair flawlessly coiffed—did not seem quite right to him. Something about her features set her apart, especially around the eyes.

Until that moment, Ben considered himself thirty years older than anyone in the compound, but the woman was a contemporary, no doubt about it. Despite her clown costume,

the sight was a welcome one to him. And when their eyes met by chance, the woman laughed and walked directly to his table.

"Ben Carlisle!" she exclaimed.

Her companion followed. Ben tried to peel the paint away, and all the nips and tucks of plastic surgery, to locate a familiar face. He was unsuccessful.

"You don't recognize me, do you?" she said stopping at the table. "Anne Burton? At the *Times*? Back in the seventies? You haven't changed a bit."

Ben nodded and smiled, stretching over the table to shake her outstretched hand. "It's been a long time. Sorry, Anne."

"I know. And I don't exactly look the same. Video can't bear the awful toll nature takes. They put me in the shop a few years ago for the works: hair, face, body. They want to reach their older viewers, but . . . you know. Oh, this is Inspector Anderson."

Ben stood again to shake the hand of the young man who had been lurking in Anne's shadow until now. He had a shaggy dog sort of appearance: longish hair, long face, sort of mopey expression. He seemed completely out of place here. Ben liked him immediately.

A waiter appeared. Ben or-

dered another scotch, Anne and the inspector decaffeinated coffee. Anne didn't wait for the conversation to lag. "I knew you were coming, Ben. Jim . . . Jim told me."

Ben read sadness in her eyes, but of a wistful quality; not the deep sadness of a true friend.

"Mr. Anderson is with International Security. He's here to tie up the loose ends. Jim's death, I mean," she continued.

"Loose ends?" said Ben.

"Formalities really," said the inspector. "There is some question of the medication administered during efforts to revive Mr. Bradley, though my first impression is that everything possible was done to save him. An autopsy was performed, but the results aren't ready as yet. Ms. Burton tells me you were a colleague of Mr. Bradley's. That is why I took the liberty of having some of his personal effects left with you. It seems there is no family to speak of."

"Sure," said Ben. "What was your tie to Jim, Anne?"

She stared at the table. "We lived together for a couple years. Right after he came back from Vietnam a million years ago. We parted on friendly terms, saw one another occasionally until I started working in video. I hadn't spoken with him in twenty years, though, until we crossed paths here. Is that tobacco?"

Ben nodded, picked up his cigarette pack and offered her one. He took another for himself, lit both, and they smoked silently as the waiter made his delivery. When he had gone, Anne took a deep drag and exhaled with relish.

"Delicious. I forget how wickedly pleasurable nasty habits can be." She watched him sip his drink. "I see you've maintained all of yours."

"Some."

"You'll never live to a ripe old age like that," she said; then a pained look passed momentarily over her features as she realized the implications of bad jokes about mortality under the circumstances.

The smoke clouded the air between them. Ben thought Anderson would be disgusted and leave, but he appeared completely at ease, sitting in silence and observing. A cop, all right.

"Jim . . ." Ben began, then thought better of any attempts at eulogy. "You've been in video since the eighties, you said?"

She nodded. "I left the *Times* in '81. I'm not surprised you didn't remember me. You were a star. I was an understudy at best. Video beckoned. I took the glamor, money, and lifestyle and ran with it. Now . . . Jim told me the other day he was convinced journalism died with the dominance of video news-

gathering. He believed we're just newsreaders who parrot anything we're given to say. Of course, he was right, but I was never so much the idealist. I know the world can't be saved. He wasn't so sure. How about you, Ben?"

"I try."

She smiled. "Ben, your audience, what's left of it, lives in retirement homes. No one under seventy reads newspapers any more."

He didn't argue. The inspector studied the table. Anne put out her cigarette.

"... eakfast ... eight hundred ... of the village will commence at nine hundred hours. ... Good morning, Mr. Carlyle. It is now seven hundred hours. Breakfast will be served at eight hundred hours. Your tour of the Olympic Village will commence at nine hundred hours. ... Good morning, Mr. Carlyle. It is now seven hundred hours. Breakfast ..."

Tracing the soft, seductive though unmistakably computer-generated voice to its source in a speaker implanted in his bedside table, Ben fumbled with a half dozen nearby switches before hitting the one that brought silence.

The dining room was located just beyond the lounge, nearly at the end of the building's long

central corridor. Ben breakfasted alone and quickly, then returned to his quarters.

Shortly before nine, as instructed, he was waiting in the deserted press lounge for his guide. Precisely on time, a young man entered. He wore a black jumpsuit with the Olympic rings stitched across the left side of his chest. When he introduced himself, Ben caught only the last name—Hansen. It was apparent that handling newspaper reporters was something considerably less than a plum assignment. Being mentioned in an obscure article that no one would ever read could not compete with having your face splashed across videoscreens worldwide.

But Hansen was professionally courteous and efficient nonetheless. Ben decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

For the first time since arriving, Ben walked outside into the fresh air and sunshine. He stood for a moment, face upturned, and let the rays warm his old bones. Then he let his eyes fall back to earth; to the fences, pavement, concrete. Hansen waited, but seemed visibly relieved when Ben at last fell in step beside him. They proceeded toward the next building in line. Hansen began his recitation.

"The structure we're about to enter is called the Stadium, Mr.

Carlyle. It contains the computer system that monitors Olympic activities worldwide. Here we compile and collate all data necessary to tabulate results and declare a single victor in contests held simultaneously in the eight competing countries. Building #4 is Council House, where our Olympic Ambassadors supervise the progress of the Games, rule on protests, review the results, and make related decisions. Building #1 contains housing for all officials and visiting dignitaries."

They entered the stadium. After being frisked by a laser camera in the hall, they passed into the waiting room. Hansen processed their identity cards through a computer that served as receptionist, and a large steel door slid open, revealing the stadium proper. It was a cavernous room designed like a space flight control center, with row upon row of official drones sitting in front of monitors, their glazed eyes undistracted by the entrance of a stranger. There was no conversation on the floor; only the quiet hum of air conditioning and computers, an electronic stew.

Hansen escorted Ben up a stairway to a soundproof observation booth, suspended fifteen feet above the floor. They sat on plastic chairs and Hansen picked up where he had left off. To

make the young man feel useful, Ben switched on his tape recorder and set it on a small table between them.

"From this single room, we are able to monitor every phase of the Olympic Games down to the minutest detail," he began in a genuinely awed tone, as if hearing this bit of news for the first time himself. "For example, if the hundred meter final is held at thirteen hundred hours in New York, results from the other eight nations can be tabulated simultaneously and a winner declared nearly as soon as it would had they been racing together. This intricate, finely tuned system improves the entire Olympic framework by systematically eliminating the potential for human error . . ."

Ben stopped listening, more or less. He let his tape recorder do the work while he watched the inactivity below. It was a major event when someone moved to press a button. For the most part, they simply gazed vacantly at their monitors.

Hansen was saying something about time zones. Ben knew some countries were forced to compete at ungodly hours. Event scheduling was based solely on video ratings, with the highest rated country getting to choose the time. The U.S. had won this contest within a contest since they switched to the

present format eight years ago.

Ben shifted uncomfortably in his chair, then stood and walked over to a large oil painting that was bolted to the wall. It featured a landscape somewhere near Lake Geneva. Hansen continued on for a minute or two before noticing Ben's lack of interest. He stopped talking, and Ben filled the silence with Lewis Carroll.

"The sun was shining on
the sea,
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to
make
The billows smooth and
bright—
And this was odd, because
it was
The middle of the night.' "

"What?" asked Hansen, getting out of his chair.

"Tweedle-Dee," Ben replied. He walked out the door and down the stairs. His flustered guide scurried after him.

"Do you have any questions, sir?" Hansen asked.

"One," Ben replied. "Why?"

"Why? I'm afraid I don't understand," said Hansen, handing Ben the recorder.

"No, I suppose not. . . . I'd like to go back to my room, if you don't mind."

"But there's so much more, sir. The Council House is . . ."

"I've seen quite enough, thanks."

"S econd day . . . This place is ominous, sterile, and malignant. They're applying microcircuit leeches to our fading sense of humanity; replacing our blood with electric current . . ."

He switched the machine off, set it on the coffee table, and again picked up Jim's guidebook. He stared at the page where his colleague had twice scribbled "Sisyphus" and wished he could get his hands on Jim's notes and tapes. He had written off the comment as basic disgust with the new Games when he first saw that page. Now a hunch was building inside his hazy brain cells, and the word was taking on greater significance.

"Sisyphus" was a term Jim had used a lot over the years, mostly in private and mostly as an insult for politicians. It was a code word signifying double-talk, or outright lying, on the part of government and military officials. He had even coined the verb "sisyphing."

Although most people who ever studied basic Greek mythology knew that Sisyphus was the guy condemned forever to push a boulder up a steep hill without reaching the top, there

was also a second legend, less well known, that Bradley had shared with Ben back in their 'Nam days:

A man named Autolychus was suspected of stealing the cattle of Polyaenus. Sisyphus stopped this by putting lead tablets on the hooves of the cattle with the words "Stolen by Autolychus" printed on them. Then he simply tracked the hoofprints to the guilty party when the cattle disappeared.

Politicians were even more transparent and cooperative, Jim used to say. They attached the lead tablets for you with obvious lies and evasive answers to simple questions. Since the name had been written both times next to quotes by the American ambassador, Jim must have had his suspicions. Ben had a suspect and a couple of ideas. Time would tell what, if anything, it was all worth.

"... now seven hundred hours. Breakfast..."

Ben's reactions were improving as far as the alarm was concerned.

His interview with Jameson was scheduled for nine hundred hours. Ben dressed quickly and headed for the dining room to get coffee. There were only a few people scattered about the room. Undoubtedly something important was already going on

elsewhere and he hadn't been told.

Inspector Anderson appeared at the entrance, and headed straight for the coffee urn without acknowledging anyone. He brought his coffee directly to Ben's table, however.

"Nice day," said Anderson as he took a seat across from Ben.

"Is it? You'd never guess so in here. Why couldn't they hack out a couple of windows for God's sake?"

"Security, I suppose."

Ben didn't think that worth a reply; at least not a civil one. He raised his cup and sipped. Coffee was the only thing in the world that had actually improved over the last twenty years, he thought.

The inspector was playing an old game with him. He was assuming that the silence between them would make Ben uncomfortable, compel him to talk. But what about, Ben wondered. He had worked the police beat in his early years. He knew some moves himself, so he waited out the young cop, who finally broke the silence.

"Mr. Carlyle. How well do you know Anne Burton?"

Ben shrugged. "Casual acquaintance... many years ago... not well at all, why?"

"Please don't be offended by this, but I'm wondering if you think she might be capable of

murder; of Jim Bradley's murder specifically."

Ben did not betray his surprise at the sudden mention of this new word, "murder," in what he had been told was a routine investigation. Tipping his chair back, he put his hands behind his head and studied the cop's eyes. Anderson didn't blink. Ben had a lifelong habit of passing judgment on people's eyes; a lifelong, and often unreliable, habit.

"I thought you said heart attack."

Anderson nodded. "So it would seem on the surface. But, by all accounts, Bradley was a healthy chap. I have discovered he had a complete physical shortly before coming over here; and a doctor friend of mine insists that the nature of his death, given the circumstances, is . . . peculiar."

"And what do the doctors here say?"

"They agree in principle, but insist they did everything they could for him with the knowledge at their disposal. They say a foreign substance of some sort could have been administered—one of any number of essentially undetectable potions—but they also stress the fact that not only is there no real motive for such a case, there is also no evidence of such a scenario."

Ben nodded. "In answer to your original question, I do not

know Anne at all in any sense that would allow me to pass judgment on her relative innocence. It seems pretty far-fetched, though. They were together a long, long time ago, and she didn't seem to be holding any grudges. She seemed quite unaffected. Wouldn't a guilty murderer try a little harder to fake her sorrow under the circumstances?"

"Perhaps. Murderers are absolutely unpredictable, especially where passion, even old passion, is concerned."

"Leave the old out of this, will you?"

"Third day . . . William Jameson is forty-two years old and lives currently in Washington, D.C. A career diplomat, he has risen in just twenty years from an advisory post with our embassy in Australia to his current position as United States Olympic Ambassador and Chairman of the President's Special Commission for Olympic Franchising. He also serves on the board of directors for the multinational corporation, EURAMCO. . . . Mr. Jameson, could you briefly outline your duties as Olympic ambassador?"

"Yes, Mr. Carlysle. Primarily, I'm responsible for the smooth operation of the Olym-

pic process from the American standpoint. I monitor the computer transmissions, double-check security precautions. If a problem of any sort arises, I and my fellow ambassadors are empowered by our respective nations to make all necessary decisions to find a solution right here in Geneva. In addition, of course, I brief you and your distinguished media colleagues each day on the progress of the Games. Maintaining open lines of communication with the world is naturally paramount to our effort here."

"Could you tell us a little about the corporate franchising of events and subsidizing of athletes? Don't you think the Olympics have been taken out of the athletes' hands in a sense?"

"Not in the least. In fact, I find your attitude contradictory. You are old enough to remember the days when Olympic athletes literally had to go into debt to participate, especially Americans. We no longer play by those antiquated rules, Mr. Carlyle. In the case of franchising, our country's foundation is Free Enterprise. It's worked well enough for more than two centuries, and it continues to do so. We righted a wrong in the case of franchising. Previously, one city garnered all the benefits of hosting the Games. Now a greater num-

ber can share the bounty. Letting U.S. cities submit bids for individual events is not only an equitable system, it is intrinsically American."

"They managed all right when..."

"Please don't interrupt. You are looking for negatives where none exist. A host city, which sells the coverage rights to one of the networks, can not only recover its expenses, but profit handsomely as well. And it opens up coverage to more networks, since they bid for the event, too. Say we take Chicago this year as an example of what I'm getting at. It is the host city for weightlifting. The network pays them for exclusive coverage rights, then in turn markets advertising time to corporate interests. In addition, the corporations not only advertise, they pay sponsorship fees to the city and subsidize athletes. Those athletes who in your day had to put their private lives on hold until their competitive days were over can now have it all. The Olympic competitor you like to picture slaving away beneath his corporate master's financial whip has never had it better. You don't hear them complaining."

"Mr. Jameson, I've heard a rumor that corporate sponsors are influencing the results here in Geneva."

"Excuse me?"

"Specifically . . . is there any truth to the rumor that in order to insure parity in medal distribution, both for participating countries and corporations involved . . . that the fix is in, and has been for a while?"

"What are you after, Carlisle? I know the newspaper business is in trouble, but I thought at least your paper had not sunk to tabloid status to gain a few readers. Did you make this up?"

"Jim Bradley told me . . . shortly before you had him killed."

"Who? . . . Don't . . . Turn that damn thing off!"

Ben was lying on the bed, staring at the white ceiling. He let the tape play on, listening to its quiet hiss. Then he struggled to his feet and walked over to the desk, where he switched off the tape player.

It had been what he had to call an educated guess. He still had no proof, but he was certain he'd struck a vein. A column full of accusations would not only be ignored by the public, it would open the paper to libel suits if they let him run it at all. So what was it really worth?

There was a knock at his door. When he didn't answer immediately, he heard the soft beeping as somebody punched in his lock code on the control panel outside.

The door slid open and three

men entered, closing the door behind them.

"I am Dr. Hecht," said the smallest of the three as they moved toward Ben. "I understand you are not feeling well."

Ben stood and backed against the wall as the men continued to approach. "I feel just fine. I feel about as sick as Jim Bradley did."

Hecht smiled. He held out his hand, and one of the assistants placed a hypodermic needle on it. He nodded. The other two moved in and, each grabbing an arm, forced Ben over to the bed, where they pushed him down and continued to restrain him.

"This isn't the way," Ben whispered.

"I'd stop right there if I were you, mate," said a familiar voice coming from the doorway.

Their hold was released on Ben, and he struggled to his feet. Inspector Anderson and four other men were now in the room, guns drawn.

They were in the press lounge—Ben and Anderson—but this time they were both drinking scotch.

"Did I say thanks?" asked Ben, lighting a cigarette.

"Twice," Anderson replied with a smile.

"Tell you the truth, I did consider going to you with my suspicions, but I wasn't quite sure

whose team you were on."

Anderson shrugged. "It's still not absolutely clear, Ben. There are many, many . . . gray areas."

"But you said the 'medical team' would sing, at least one or two of them."

"That's true. But you also must understand that I've overstepped my bounds already. As you had probably surmised from the start, I was sent up as a formality to rubber stamp this affair. I failed miserably in that sense. We certainly have three arrests, and an attempted murder charge, but since Jameson used an apparently effective chain of command to have his orders carried out, the chances of our getting cooperation all the way up that chain are highly improbable. The stir I've already caused will probably cost me my job, or at least my proverbial stripes."

"So the carpet is lifted, the dust neatly swept under, and the show goes on."

"Quite likely."

"I may not have the evidence, Anderson, but I damn well have enough fodder for one hell of a smear campaign."

"Where, Ben? In your bloody newspaper? All you'll accomplish is to give your contemporaries something else to be depressed about. You think the networks are going to pick it up? They're part of the problem,

my friend, not the solution."

Ben sighed. It was beginning to look as if all he was going to get out of this was a hangover tomorrow.

Anne rushed into the lounge, spotted the two men, and headed for their table. Ben noticed immediately that her hair was in disarray and approved of the change. On her way, she was forced to run a gauntlet of laughing video people whose hands and voices tried to detain her as she passed by them. She didn't seem to notice.

"Ben! I just heard. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, thanks to your friend here."

She sat down and, as if in direct reaction, Anderson stood, draining what was left of the scotch. He reached out to shake Ben's hand.

"I'll be in touch, mate. I have work to do. With luck, our friends will give me a murder confession on the Bradley case to go with their little sojourn in your room. We have medications of our own, you see. That is, if I'm still employed."

"Happy trails, sheriff," said Ben, raising his glass. "And thanks again."

"Be careful," said Anderson as he departed.

"What did he mean?" Anne asked.

Ben did not reply. She looked at him for a long time, then

reached across the table and took his hand.

"Ben, when I heard . . . it was like . . . you're my last contact with the real world. I know I'm being bold, but . . ."

Ben squeezed her hand. He looked at her eyes and suddenly recognized her as the woman he had known briefly twenty years ago; a contemporary; a veteran of the news wars; potentially a friend and ally.

"How do you really feel about the video business?"

"What? . . . I guess I don't 'feel' anything. It's my job. It keeps me in the news game."

"The news game is a terminal case."

"I know."

"Or maybe it isn't," he said, tightening his grip on her hand.

She looked up, and her expression changed dramatically. "You've got a story, haven't you, Ben."

"It's Jim's story. I just did a final draft for him. Do you have a live report tomorrow night?"

Anne grinned and nodded.

"Annie, m'dear; let's you and I really tie one on this evening. And tomorrow, let's show these boobs what a real news story looks like."

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



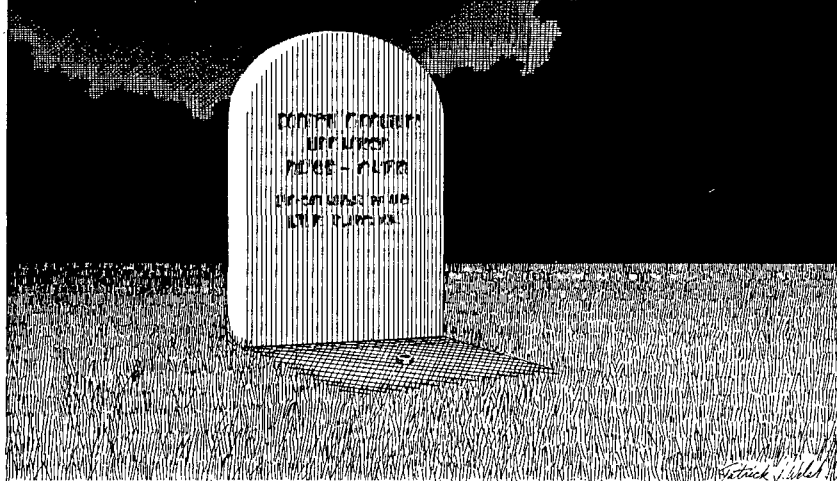
Photo by Jerry C. Smalley

Hang it all—the suspense is killing me! We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

Night of the Grave Dancer

by Doug Allyn



Ever awaken from a warm dream to find a vulture eyeing you from the bedpost? I haven't either, but I know the feeling. It's like seeing Paul Osterlan II sitting in a corner booth of the Crow's Nest with a striking, business-suited Oriental woman, the pair of them sipping Perrier twists and looking the place over like wolverines who've wandered into a rabbit hutch.

No reason they shouldn't have

been there, of course. The Nest is a popular watering hole, I'm a semi-genial host, and we have a view of the harbor and Lake Huron beyond that could make the Thinker blink. But Paul's never been big on rubbing elbows with saloon society, and the view from his penthouse office is possibly even better than mine. If he ever gives it a glance.

The woman with him was starkly lovely, no makeup or

jewelry, shoulder-length raven hair, and flawless skin the color of old ivory. Her drab, earth-tone suit only accented her appeal, as it was doubtless intended to do. Ordinarily, I would have been pleased to see her in the Nest, grateful for the glimpse of exotic grace. But instead I felt uneasy. Because she was with Paul Osterlan. And lately Paul's acquired quite a reputation as a grave dancer. And I wondered if he was planning to pirouette on mine.

I kept an eye on them through the one-way glass of my office door for a bit, hoping they'd wander off in search of browner pastures, but when Sharon buzzed me from the bar, I knew what it was about before I picked up the phone.

Paul and I exchanged mini-evaluations as I eased into a chair beside their booth, old acquaintances wondering which of us was fading faster. I decided he was. His dark hair was thinning, showing some gray, and his steel-rimmed glasses seemed a mil or two thicker. He's always been fashionably gaunt, but he looked almost haggard now, pallid as a vampire. And with the same carnivorous intensity. Prosperous, certainly. His modish pin-striped suit was London tailored, and his rep tie could have made my car payment.

"Mitch," he nodded, without

offering his hand, "how've you been?"

"Fine, Paul. And your friend is . . . ?"

"Miss, ah, Nguyen. Research."

"Is Research your given name, or is it—?"

"I'll come to the point," Paul interrupted brusquely. "I need to hire a diver. I've made some inquiries and people tell me you're the man to see."

"A diver?" The coil spring clamped around my thorax loosed a notch. "What happened, Paul? Foreclose on somebody's swamp?"

"Actually, you're not far off," he said, glancing around warily. "I'm interested in some property in the Upper Peninsula, and I need somebody to do an investigation. Underwater."

"I know a couple of reliable people up there—"

"No," he said, cutting me off. "I want you to do it, Mitch. The situation's a bit—unstable. I want someone I know."

"Why? What's the problem?"

"I understand you've done some diving in abandoned mines in the U.P."

"A few. It's risky work, but interesting. You find a lot of tools, artifacts. I haven't been down one for some time, though. Most of the old mines went back to the Ojibwas as part of the Tribal Lands settlement, and they've closed off the area."

"Exactly," he nodded, bridging his fingertips, waiting for my reaction.

"Are you saying this mine of yours is in the Tribal Lands?"

"Not very far in," Miss Nguyen put in quietly, "near the northeast corner."

"I wasn't aware the Tribal Council..." I broke off, staring at them. "You don't have any kind of a permit, do you. That's your definition of unstable?"

"I told you he'd be brighter than he looks," Paul said to Nguyen.

"I'm bright enough to tell you to forget about doing *anything* in the Tribal Lands without permission. It took the Ojibwa forty years of court fights to win back that land, and they're pretty possessive about it. A lot of young studs who think Crazy Horse let Custer off easy are patrolling the area packing M-16s."

"You surprise me. Dad used to tell me what a tiger you were."

"Yeah, well, sometimes discretion's the better part of valor. And I doubt that Dutch had much to say about me one way or the other."

"But you liked him, didn't you? My father."

The question threw me. I'd worked for Dutch Osterlan a couple of high school summers, keeping his boats in shape,

crewing on his sloop. Like him? Dutch was affable enough, but it was a businessman's geniality, all surface. Having to take orders from Paul was the reason I'd quit. Still... "I, ah, suppose most people liked Dutch," I offered.

"But they don't like me, do they?"

I felt the lightest touch of the spider. The squat, hairy one who's nestled in a shadowy corner of my psyche since 'Nam. A faint, warning shiver. Something's wrong and you're missing it. A sniper. A booby trap. Something. For a moment I considered finessing the situation, but I wasn't in the mood. And Paul wasn't worth the trouble. "No, I don't suppose you've built much of a fan club around here. Your father gave a little back to this town, the library, the new wing on the hospital. And he understood the economy up at this end of the state, or the lack of it."

"And people liked him because he stretched credit? Let notes go past due? Let them take advantage of him?"

"Nobody ever conned Dutch that I was aware of. But he could be—more than fair, I suppose, when he chose to."

"More than fair? Nice turn of phrase, Mitch. You know what it really means? To me, I mean? It means I inherited a holding company hobbled with debt, a

stack of defaulted land contracts with taxes so far in arrears that I had no choice but to foreclose. I know what people call me. A grave dancer, a ghoul who wrings cash out of other people's problems. And maybe they're right. Personally, I see it as economic Darwinism in action. My grandfather founded a company, built it from nothing, and my father all but frittered it away. Well, I'm rebuilding it. With whatever it takes."

"Have I got this straight, Paul? You feel betrayed because Dutch only left you a few mil? Gee, tough break. And as for that economic Darwinism crap, your grandfather came up here during the Depression, scarfed up a lot of land for back taxes, ran off the owners, trashed the timber, and moved on like Attila the Hun to God knows where—"

"Australia," Paul broke in coolly, "the last frontier."

"No wonder half of Down Under's a desert. The only thing your grandfather ever built was that phony castle you grew up in. You were born on third base and think you hit a triple."

"Maybe you're right, Mitch. Maybe it's time I hit one of my own. Which brings us back to square one."

"Wrong," I said, easing out of my chair, "we're not at square one, Paul. We're nowhere. I

wouldn't work for you on a bet. Get somebody else."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," he said evenly, "but I can't say I didn't expect it. Sit down, please." He glanced at Nguyen, Research, and she fished in the leather briefcase beside him, extracted an envelope, and placed it on the table.

And the spider crawled out again, more boldly this time, and perched its squat little body on my shoulder. To watch. I sat down slowly, pointedly ignoring both the spider and the envelope. Or trying to.

"Since you won't help me out for Auld Lang Syne," Paul said, "maybe you'll do it because we're partners."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your land contract for this place. I bought it from Carlsen. Are you aware that you're a payment behind?"

"I—did miss one the first year when the remodeling ran over the budget. But Carlsen agreed to wait."

"Pity he didn't insert that in the contract. It only says you're in default. And, believe me, I know everything there is to know about defaulted contracts. I can blow you out of here this afternoon, if I like. Unless you have a spare quarter million immediately at hand."

"You—son of a—"

"Easy, lady present, remember? And partners should be

civil to one another in any case. Look, I don't want your little saloon, Mitch, charming as it is. I just want you to check out an abandoned mine for me. Interested?"

I didn't answer for a moment, couldn't answer. His face was shimmering in a reddish haze and I don't think I've ever wanted to hit anyone as badly in my life. But I didn't. I held on, and realized that I was at least as angry at myself as at Paul. I could have caught up the delinquent payment, but I'd let it slide. Almost forty years old and I was still waltzing through life like a wino in a minefield. I swallowed, hard. "Tell me about the job."

"All you need to know about it is that I want it done as soon as possible—"

"Wrong," I interrupted. "I don't want to lose this place, but I don't want to get killed trying to save it, either. Diving an abandoned mine is chancy business. It takes special equipment and techniques. I'll need a backup diver—"

"No," he said sharply. "We can't bring anyone else in."

"You don't know what you're asking. You don't want to tell me about the mine, fine, then I'll tell you. You carry double equipment, two tanks, regulators, lights, everything. Because if anything goes wrong, you can't just take a deep breath

and swim for the surface. It takes as long to get out as it does to get in. The mines are deathtraps, mazes of tunnels and shafts and stopes—"

"Stopes?" Nguyen frowned.

"The caverns left by the removal of the ore. Some of them are as big as underground football stadiums with as many entrances and exits. Compasses are useless because of the iron ore in the walls, so if you make one wrong turn, you'll die trying to find your way out."

"Are you saying you won't do it?" Paul asked evenly.

"No, but I need to know everything you can tell me about the mine before I'll know if it's possible."

"Not good enough. If we—give you the particulars, I'll need your word that you'll take the job."

"I don't think so," I said, leaning back in my chair. "You've gone to a lot of trouble to set me up for this. You want me to play? Fine, then tell me the name of the game. Or I'll toss you the keys to this place right now and you can stick 'em anywhere they'll fit."

"Don't try to bluff me, Mitch. I'm out of your league."

"So I've noticed. And I'm not bluffing."

We eyed each other across the distressed oak table and half a lifetime of antipathy. He drummed his manicured nails

for a moment, but I sensed it was just for show. For whatever reason, he needed me. For now.

"What do you have to know?" he said warily.

"How old is the mine?"

Paul nodded curtly at Ngu-yen.

"It operated from 1871 to '79," she recited. "Iron ore. They tunneled down five levels, roughly four hundred meters."

"And what am I looking for?"

She hesitated a beat to glance at Paul. "Pitchblende."

"You've got to be kidding. Uranium? Even if there was any, it would have been stripped off with the original ore. There couldn't be enough left now to—"

"The mine was not abandoned because it played out," she explained coolly. "It's on the mountainside and the operation barely dented the lode. The men working the lower levels became ill; developed nasty burns that didn't heal, and their hair fell out. And when some of their wives miscarried, they decided the mine was bad luck and quit, *en masse*. The company went bankrupt and as far as anyone knows it's just another played out mine in a countryside full of them."

"How did you find out about it, Paul? Mining's not your usual area of interest, is it?"

"I found records of it in my father's estate. It was part of a

twelve thousand acre tract that my grandfather bought in the thirties for timber. During the Korean War, Dad and my grandfather tried to reopen it to mine the remaining iron. They pumped out the shaft, but the war ended and the bottom fell out of the market."

"And now the Ojibwas own it?"

"It's part of the Tribal Lands, but they've sold off a few sections in the area. I think I can cut a deal if there's any reason to. But not if they suspect there's anything of value on it. They're, ah, a bit paranoid about being cheated out of their rights. For some reason."

"Can't imagine why," I sighed. "All right, if the pitchblende's there, one deep dive with a Geiger counter should confirm it." *Plus one anonymous phone tip to the Tribal Council afterward.*

"Just check it out, and I'll give you a receipt for the delinquent payment. Fair enough?"

"Not quite. I want the receipt in advance. If something goes wrong down there I'd hate to leave my heirs a lot of—complications. No offense."

"None taken," he nodded, rising. "How soon can we do it?"

"We?"

"I'm going with you. You said you'd need help."

"It's your party," I shrugged.

"I'll need a day or so to assem-

ble and check my gear. Friday? Eleven A.M.?"

"Acceptable. We'll take my jeep. The roads up there are in poor shape. Anything I should bring?"

"Just the receipt."

"It's in the envelope in front of you," he said, "already endorsed and witnessed. See you Friday, eleven." He picked up his briefcase and stalked off without a backward glance. Nguyen frowned after him, annoyed, then shrugged and rose to follow.

"By the way," I said, "what is your given name?"

"As far as you're concerned, Mr. Mitchell," she said coldly, "it's Research. Good day." She didn't look back either.

I slid the receipt out of the envelope. Endorsed and witnessed. Technically I was already off the hook. And for a moment, I considered sticking the receipt in my pocket and telling Paul Osterlan II where to stick his job. But I didn't. There was honor involved, of course, but it wasn't just that. The spider had tried to warn me about him the moment he walked in. Paul had—changed, since Dutch's death. He seemed driven now. Obsessed. As if the graves he danced on were near the edge of a cliff. And so I decided to go ahead with the job, and told myself it was the honorable thing to do.

But the spider knew better.

The sullen glow of the October sun mirrored my mental state when Paul pulled into the Crow's Nest parking lot in a new Range Rover, the British high-tech, high-ticket version of the Land Rover, done in gleaming designer-taupe camouflage. He parked alongside my grubby Chevy pickup and climbed out to help me with my gear. He was decked out in spotless chinos, work boots, and a loden green chamois shirt. Buttoned to the throat. The work clothes wouldn't have looked more out of place on a giraffe. Still, I was grateful for the help. The tanks, twin sets of aluminum 80's, weigh a hundred twenty pounds apiece and I'd had a late night at the Nest. As we loaded the equipment into the back of his wagon, I noticed a gunrack with three cased weapons behind the driver's seat.

"Why all the firepower?"

"We're going into Indian country, remember?" Paul grunted, easing the tank pack inside. I couldn't tell if he was joking, and I was too bushed to care.

I climbed in, reclined the glove-leather bucket seat, tipped my baseball cap down over my eyes, and was already half asleep when he fired up the Rover and pointed it north.

Strobe lights flashing erratically across my eyelids gradually brought me out of an uneasy, image-racked doze. We were humming along a hundred and twenty feet above the Mackinac Straits, midway across the Big Mac bridge. The autumn sun was well past the meridian, flickering through the struts and cables of the four mile span. Quite an achievement, the Big Mac, an engineer's fantasy realized in steel and concrete, so strikingly handsome that suicides seldom use it. Or perhaps they just change their minds. You'd have to be in the grip of one helluva dark muse to gaze across the leagues of tousled pearl and turquoise whitecaps, savor the feral tang of the Canadian breeze, and still want to toss your life over the rail like a gum wrapper.

We rolled through the sleepy bridgehead town of St. Ignace without slowing, swung west on U.S. 2 into the shaded green stillness of Hiawatha National Forest, and I nodded off again. A deeper, harder sleep this time, down into black water, the land of ghosts and dogfish. The lurch of the Range Rover hitting the shoulder jerked me blearily awake, up from the depths. Paul tapped a tab on the console, shifting the tranny into four-wheel drive, then gunned the Rover sharply off the road,

jolting onto an overgrown, barely discernible dirt trail. The wagon was bucking and groaning like a gut-shot steer as Paul hammered it through the underbrush. Skeletal branches of tag alders and poplars clawed its flanks, shrieking like fingernails down a blackboard.

"Hey, what's the big hurry?"

I said, clutching the crash bar on the dash, fully awake now.

"We passed three young guys in a pickup a few miles back," Paul grunted. "I wanted to get over this ridge and out of sight before they reach the turnoff."

I tried to check our backtrail, but the lurching of the wagon made it impossible to get more than fragmentary glimpses to the rear. Paul was totally focused on keeping the vehicle upright, wrestling the Rover down the rutted ghost of a path like a whitewater raft. And, I had to admit, handling it like a pro. We crested the ridge at forty, went airborne for ten meters, and banged down on the hardpan like a train wreck. The Rover shuddered a protest, but Paul didn't seem to notice, nor did he slow down though there was no danger we'd be spotted now by anything but a rogue bear. I considered pitching a bitch, but the intensity in his face checked me. And he *was* driving well. So I swallowed my complaints, hunkered back in my seat, and tried to survive

the ride with minimal breakage.

The trail, such as it was, was a spine-shattering rough-country run through a broken jumble of foothills thickly timbered with ash and aspen and jack pine, with covens of tag alder looming over the road like the worthless woodland vampires they are. We passed several forks and turnouts as the trail worked gradually up toward what I guessed was a southern peak of the Huron Range, but Paul never hesitated, picking his way through the northcountry jungle like a *voyageur*.

"You've been here before, haven't you," I said.

"A few times with my father, hunting, when we still owned all of this. And several times over the summer," he nodded, keeping his eyes on the trail. "I thought the water in the mine might recede a bit, but it didn't."

"It won't drop below the table up here. They used steam pumps the size of locomotives to keep the lower levels dry enough to work. I, ah, didn't know you hunted. Didn't know Dutch did either, for that matter."

"You think crewing on my dad's boat for a couple of summers makes you the Osterlan family historian?"

"No, I guess not." For some reason, any reference to his father seemed to grate on Paul.

And there was more involved than a few overdue notes. I could feel the spider squirming in his psychic cubbyhole again. This whole situation had an uneasy feel to it, a nasty edge I could almost taste. And then I realized that I *was* tasting it, had been for several miles. The breeze was subtly seasoned with the stench of decay, as though the mountain had died of its wounds, and was slowly rotting in the sun.

"We're almost there, aren't we," I said grimly.

"Another mile or so," Paul frowned. "How did you know?"

"Hydrogen sulfide. It leaches out of the fracture granite in the mines, contaminates the groundwater, and fouls the air for miles. Can't you smell it?"

"Yes," Paul nodded, smiling oddly. "I suppose I can. Rank, isn't it."

"It's worse down below. The pressure forces it into the pores of the suit. My equipment's going to reek for weeks."

"Think about your payment book being current, it may help."

"That's pretty much your answer for everything, isn't it. Payment books. Contracts."

"They help define the—parameters of life. To make it manageable."

"Or help maintain the illusion that life is manageable."

"Don't lecture me about illusions, Mitchell. What have

you done with your life? Serve drinks? Play in the water? You're an arrested adolescent."

"Maybe," I conceded. "But the way I live doesn't hurt anybody but me, and I like my life. Do you ever have any fun, Paul? Or do you get all your jollies dancing on graves?"

He glanced at me for a moment, his eyes showing a mix of contempt and—something else. I couldn't read him at all. We had a shared history that spanned nearly thirty years, and yet knew each other no better than strangers passing in an airport. And that bothered me a little. I was still trying to decide why when he gunned the Rover over the crest of a hogback ridge and began pumping the brakes as we hurtled down an eroded corduroy trough that ended beside a broad, milky pond. We'd arrived.

At first glance, there was no sign a mine had ever been there. The detritus of erosion and the bitter Northern Michigan winters had erased whatever artifacts the miners left behind. Only the scar on the face of the mountain remained, an unnatural savage gash sixty meters high and a hundred wide, dynamite-blasted from the living rock, granite gleaming in the waning afternoon sun like exposed bone, tiger-striped by a century of sulfide weeping into the rancid pool at its base. Paul

eased the Rover to a halt on a level shelf a few yards from the water. Blood-colored chunks of kidney-shaped hematite, iron ore, littered the shoreline. Above us, the cliff face towered like a tombstone, a monument to the rape of the mountains.

We unloaded my diving gear in silence in the lengthening afternoon shadows. I stripped to my shorts, then methodically dressed for a descent into Inuit hell, the dark land of never-ending December. Farmer John style foam-neoprene wet suit, hooded vest and high top pants, boots, weight belt, and an inflatable life vest. The vest was solely to give me neutral buoyancy for swimming. Once I entered the tunnel, blowing the vest wouldn't save my life, it would pin me to the ceiling like a wasp on a windshield.

I doublechecked my gear, two regulators attached to separate air tanks, two flashlights, and a larger helmet light powered by a belt-mounted battery pack, capillary depth gauge, and dive timer. The remote-phone sized Geiger counter's needle flipped over when we held it close to Paul's radium-dialed watch. So far, all systems go. I put on my flippers, Paul helped me strap on my tank pack, and I waded cautiously into the murky pool. And slipped beneath the surface into a pearl gray universe.

I rolled slowly without

breathing, looking upward for the telltale stream of bubbles that would indicate an O-ring leak in my equipment. Nothing. I checked both regulators, then straightened and began swimming slowly toward the shadowy maw of the mine entrance.

A world of eternal twilight, the hazy water turbid with silt and hydrogen sulfide suspension. And suspended time. Above the waterline nothing remained to mark the miners' efforts, but down here everything was preserved, protected by the frigid subterranean water from the elements and from decay. Empty dynamite boxes littered the mine entrance, rimed with silvery silt as though they'd been dipped in pewter. Shattered pick handles lay where they'd been tossed aside more than a century before, a broken shovel, a dulled steel pike.

The pallid light began to fade as I swam warily into the gloom of the mine entrance, and I switched on the helmet lamp. Rusted steel cart rails leapt up a few inches from the floor of the shaft, outlined now in bold relief. Ahead on the right, the timekeeper's shack, an upright, outhouse-sized wooden cubicle. I swam over to check in with the shades who guarded this place, and to hitch my lifeline to the rusty doorlatch.

I trailed the cart rails into the

tunnel, keeping my movements minimal to avoid roiling the silt, feeling the comforting umbilical tug of the lifeline playing out of the reel on my belt. Gray-green algae coated the walls, clumped like leech colonies on the corroded remnants of four-inch iron pipe that snaked along the ceiling. When the mine was active, this corridor would have echoed with the thunder of blasting, the ring of picks, the ceaseless, cardinal thumping of the steam pumps, but except for the metallic burble of my breathing, it was deathly silent now. Nothing lived down here but the moss, not fish, nor snakes nor even insects could survive in the poisonous sulfide stew. The shaft was an open ulcer on the bowel of the mountain, and I could taste the rancid stench of gangrene with every breath.

The corridor sloped gradually downward for seventy meters, ending at a rough wooden platform with a two-meter square hole near its center. The first elevator shaft. The miners would have ridden a rattletrap steel cage down to the next level, jammed together like lemmings, many of them youths of fourteen or fifteen who'd never known childhood. And yet they sang their way below, caroling hymns from Finland and from Wales as they clattered down into the hammering din, to work

fourteen hour shifts in a dusty, twilight purgatory where death and laceration haunted the shadows, waiting for the little men to make little mistakes.

Too often they died young. Of maiming injuries, or black lung. Or cancer, their bodies riddled with radiation, the slow, glowing revenge of the mountain. But perhaps not in this mine. I'd been watching the Geiger counter as I swam. The gauge twitched occasionally, registering background radiation, but no indication so far that uranium ore in any quantity had ever been here. Perhaps it had been carted to the surface with the iron ore and freighted south to end on the slagheaps of Pittsburgh or Chicago. Or perhaps there'd never been any. And the grave dancer had stumbled.

Too soon to be sure one way or the other. I knelt on the platform, hammered a safety ring into the waterlogged timber beside the opening, and snapped the lifeline into the ring. Then I picked up a chunk of ore for added weight and stepped off into the elevator shaft.

Free fall, drifting slowly down into the dark, monitoring my depth gauge, I sank silently into the center of the mountain, enveloped in the pale lunar halo of my helmet lamp. Sixty, seventy, eighty feet, touching down on the rude plank floor of the next level at just under a

hundred feet. Without so much as a quiver from the Geiger counter.

Five tunnels radiated away from this platform like rays from a dark star. A glance at my dive timer told me I could check out a couple of them for radioactivity if I hustled. I tried driving a safety ring into the planking, but the wood had gone spongy from the greater pressure at this depth and wouldn't hold the spike. Improve then.

I scanned the littered platform for something to anchor the line. A hurricane lamp with a shattered lens, a few tool handles, a cinder block on a pile of rags . . . The block would have to do. I swam over to it, unhooked the reel from my belt, and tried to slip it through the hole in the block, but it tangled in the rotted burlap. I yanked the block free—and a corpse jerked bolt upright out of the filthy sacking! Bloodless, pallid flesh sloughing away from its bones like melting suet, clotted eyesockets glaring blindly up at me in horrible familiarity, its mouth opening to speak, then the face dissolving as the jaw unhinged and tumbled into the roiling whirlwind of silt.

"NNOOOOO!!!" I arched backward as though I'd been jolted by a thousand-volt shock, instinctively thrusting away from it, slamming into the shaft

wall with a thunderous clang that shook me to my soul. The corpse began howling, my Vietnam tarantula exploded out of his lair, his hairy legs scrabbling at my throat, and I rolled and fled into the nearest tunnel, thighs pumping, heart hammering in my chest, thudding in my temples, breath keening through the regulator, and still the screaming continued, drawing closer and closer. And I swam harder still, rocketing desperately down the tunnel like a manic torpedo until suddenly the walls dissolved and I plunged into a fathomless pearl mist. And welcomed it. Invisibility. Refuge. I swam on, but more slowly now, chest heaving, perspiration fogging my mask. And I gradually slowed my pace . . . and my breathing. And the spider retreated to his psychic den. And I attempted to rally the fractured remnants of my self control.

The howling continued behind me, but not as loudly as before, and I recognized it for what it was. The shriek of escaping air. I'd smashed one of the tank valves on the shaft wall when I'd jerked away from . . . It. *But sweet, sweet Jesus, that face . . .* My hands were trembling, and I couldn't stop gulping air, hyperventilating. *The jaw fell open, and this*

time it spoke, Hello, welcome to—

"STOP IT!" I shouted aloud, at the corpse and at myself, my voice strangled and inhuman in my mask. I clamped my jaw around the mouthpiece and grimly forced myself to calm.

A corpse. A dead body. That's what it was. And that's all it was. And I've seen bodies before. Even underwater. *But its face, falling to pieces—* I blinked, and harried the image of the corpse back into a shadowy corner, beside the spider. Later. I'd deal with it later. If there was going to be a later for me.

The audible alarm was rattling a warning, and the regulator was beginning to choke off, which meant the tank was nearly empty. I fumbled over my shoulder for the backup regulator, said a silent prayer, sucked in a final gasp, and switched mouthpieces. If I'd damaged the backup tank, too, I'd be as dead as that thing back on the platform in a . . . But the backup tank was apparently intact, and few things in life taste as sweet as a breath that might be your last. Reprieved, then. But not for long.

I wheeled slowly around, scanning the turbid water in the halo of my helmet lamp, but there was nothing to see. Nothing. I was adrift in a shapeless vapor, a vast, subterranean

cloud. Only the slow rise of my exhaust bubbles allowed me any sense of direction at all. Evidently I was in a stope, one of the caverns left by the removal of the ore. And I had no idea how big it was, or how to get out of it. I closed my eyes and concentrated, trying to recall how long I'd swum after I left the tunnel, but it was hopeless. Thirty meters? Fifty? Too far to risk trying blindly to make my way back. I was on my last tank, twenty minutes, no more. There'd be dozens of tunnels connected to this place, and if I took the wrong one . . . I shook off the thought.

First things first. Up was the only direction I could be certain of, and there might be an air shaft or an exit above. So I kicked off gently, following the rising bubbles, tracking my own silvery spoor up and up for what seemed an eternity. A minute. A minute and a half. And then I saw tiny explosions ahead, and slowed my pace, and very gently broke the surface.

My God. The stope was immense. I was a meter or so away from the ceiling of a gigantic underground cavern that rolled away from me into the darkness like an inverted moonscape. Still, there was air up here other than my own. I removed my mouthpiece and risked a shallow breath. And

gagged. The foul sulfide stench was horrible, barely breathable. And flat and stale, which meant there was probably no airshaft. I switched off my helmet lamp, and waited for my eyes to adjust to the blackness, but blackness it remained. And that clinched it. There was no hint of light up here, no exit. Somehow I'd have to get out the way I got in.

I unclipped one of the flashlights from my belt, narrowed its beam, and played it along the silvered surface of the pool. Even using the water as a reflector, the beam could only reach one wall of the cavern, some forty meters away. That must be the one, then. I wasn't sure how far I'd swum after leaving the tunnel, but I didn't think I could have crossed this room, ergo, the entrance tunnel should be somewhere in that wall. I'd bet my life on it.

Staying on the surface to conserve air, I swam cautiously to the wall, slipped my diving knife out of its ankle sheath, and scraped away a patch of algae to serve as a marker, hoping to God I wouldn't need it. Then I inserted my mouthpiece, rolled, and swam for the bottom.

I decided arbitrarily to work to my left. If I couldn't find the entrance tunnel, I could find my mark again and work the

other side. For as long as my air held out. And I also decided that if I failed to find the tunnel, I'd accept the consequences here in the depths rather than prolonging things up above in the reeking dark.

A moot point, as it happened.

The fourth tunnel mouth I examined contained the jewels, an indescribably exquisite chain of irregular, silvered pearls trapped against its ceiling; a trail of air bubbles left behind by my leaking tank like breadcrumb crumbs in the forest, to show me the way back. All I had to do was follow them out. And to retrieve my lifeline from the Thing on the platform.

As I swam past the timekeeper's shack, I almost panicked again. There was no light ahead, and for a moment I thought something had closed off the mine entrance, that I'd been buried alive. With him. But the entrance was clear. As I broke the surface, spat out my mouthpiece, and breathed the first real air I'd tasted in what seemed a year, I realized nightfall had arrived early. The sun had disappeared behind the tombstone peak, and the sky was dark with storm clouds, angry, roiling thunderheads that promised rain at any moment. Still, a lovely night, as fine as I've ever seen.

"You're late," Paul said. "I

was beginning to—wonder." He was crouched over a small, sputtering campfire built in the lee of the Rover, a few feet from the shore. One of the rifles was on his lap. A Ruger .44 magnum carbine, with a banana clip.

"I ran into a little trouble," I said, staggering the last few feet to the bank. "What's with the gun?" I unbuckled my tanks and collapsed beside the fire, exhausted, utterly drained.

"What happened? What did you find?"

"What you sent me down for. The Land Down Under."

"The L—? What are you talking about?"

"Australia, Paul. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I sent you down to check for uranium."

"Well, there isn't any. And if that fairy tale you sold me about miners dying of burns and fathering monsters was true, there should have been pitchblende down there. Or something. But there's no more radiation in that mine than in your wristwatch. I did find something down there, though, or rather someone. And that's what you really hired me for, isn't it."

"You—found a body down there?"

"Not just any body. Your grandfather's body, I think."

His knuckles went white on the

gunstock, but he showed no other reaction. The firelight danced in his glasses, his face a dappled mask in flickering orange and black. Unreadable.

"I don't understand. Why would you think—?"

"Who else? A guy who knows zip about mining sends me down a mine he doesn't own any more to look for uranium that isn't there. And the body was on the second level elevator platform almost a hundred feet down. It could only have been dropped there when the mine was pumped out. During the Korean War, wasn't it? When your family still owned it. Besides, it, ah, it looked familiar to me. For just a moment. A family resemblance, I think. In any case, it should be fairly easy to identify. It's still intact. More or less."

"Intact? But how could it be?"

"It's cold at a hundred feet down, Paul, eternally. And hydrogen sulfide leaches the oxygen from the water, makes it anaerobic. Nothing can live in it, not even bacteria. So nothing ever really dies in it, either. But of course, your father couldn't have known that. Could he."

He didn't reply. He glanced away for a moment, staring into the darkness, but I glimpsed his eyes as he turned, and any doubts I'd had were erased. There was terrible anguish there. And more. Rage?

"Why didn't you just tell me what you wanted going in," I asked quietly. "It would have made it a lot simpler for both of us."

"I wasn't—sure it was true. When I was sorting through the paperwork of my father's estate, I found—odds and ends that didn't make sense, deals begun and then reversed, all in the early fifties, around the time my grandfather—left. Apparently he'd planned to liquidate all of our holdings here and move the family to Australia with him."

"But your father objected?"

"He had no say in the matter. All of our assets were in my grandfather's name, everything. My father was only a caretaker. And then my grandfather gave him power of attorney. And went on ahead. Or so we were told. My, ah, grandfather supposedly died in a plane crash in Australia several years later, his body was never recovered. But there were only a few telegrams in the interim, no letters with signatures, and no reference to the move at all. There was only one way it made sense."

"What made you think of this mine?"

"My father brought me up here several times over the years, hunting. Even then I thought it was an odd place to hunt. There's no game in the

area for miles because of the poisoned water. And I found records indicating he'd hired an Upper Peninsula law firm to fight to keep this place out of the Tribal Lands settlement. We owned twelve thousand acres up here, but he only tried to save the mine. So I wondered. And I hired you."

"To look for uranium."

"I honestly hoped that I was wrong, that you wouldn't find anything." He looked away again, staring out into the night, seeing . . . ? God knows. But I noticed that the muzzle of his weapon had shifted. In my direction.

"So," I said softly. "What happens now?"

"I don't know. Do you understand what this means? My fath—" He choked, gagging on the word. "He—not only murdered my grandfather, he's destroyed me as well. What he did puts everything I have, or my family has, in jeopardy. His estate can be challenged, tied up in court for years. We could lose everything."

"Unless I disappear, too. Is that how you're figuring it?"

He eyed me warily over the fire, and in the rippling shadows, his whole face seemed to be ablaze. "Disappear?"

"It won't work, you know. People know we're together—"

"Do they? Mitch, what the hell are you talking about?"

"About murder. That's why we're here, isn't it?"

"Yes, I guess it is." He removed his glasses, and massaged the bridge of his nose, and I realized he was nearly as exhausted as I was. "And you think you might be next? Well, if there's a family tradition to uphold here, I'll have to pass. I dance on graves, but I don't put people in them."

"Then why the rifle, Paul? It's a little dim for hunting."

"The rifle?" He glanced down at the carbine in his lap as though he had forgotten he was holding it. "You were gone so long," he said, swallowing, "and I was afraid to be alone out here. I'm, ah, nyctophobic, afraid of the dark. Have been all my life."

I met his gaze across the campfire, this stranger I'd known since childhood, seeing him for the first time, really. A man who was afraid of the dark. Like the rest of us.

"You know," he continued, his voice barely above a whisper, "the worst of it isn't finding out about what—my father did. Or even losing the money. But how can I tell my mother about this. What do I say?"

"How about—nothing?"

"I wish it could be that easy, but it's not. We can't leave my grandfather's body here."

"Can't we? Your grandfather was a reiver, Paul, a pirate

without a ship. Do you really think he'd be happier in a plastic box under a lawn? Or buried up here, in his own mountain."

"It's—not that simple. You found the body, suppose someone else does?"

"They won't. I worked UDT in the navy. Underwater demolition. These old mines are dangerous. We'd be doing the Ojibwas a favor by sealing it off."

"I see," he nodded slowly, considering the idea. "And I, ah, suppose you have a fee in mind for—doing the Ojibwas this favor?"

"The way I see it, everything you have is at risk here, Paul. And you're holding the mortgage on the only thing I own. An even trade?"

He gazed blankly into the fire for a moment without replying. Then he took a ragged breath, and put his steel-rimmed glasses back on. And when he looked up, the boy afraid of the dark had vanished. And the grave dancer was back.

"You're asking me to swap you a mortgage worth a quarter of a mil just for setting off some dynamite, Mitch? Did you suffer brain damage down there? Perhaps we—can work something out, but you'll have to realign your expectations with reality, my friend." He got briskly to his feet, picked up my

tank pack, and lugged it to the Range Rover. I stood slowly, aching in every joint, staring after him. And felt an icy touch on my shoulder. But not from the spider. It was the first chill kiss of a mountain downpour, the end of a perfect day.

I'm half owner of the Crow's Nest now, or nearly half. Forty-nine percent, to be exact. But I rarely see my partner. Paul Osterlan moved south a few months after, lock, stock, and Research, to Detroit, where the economy's a battleground and there are plenty of corporate graves to dance on. And perhaps that's why he went, in search of a bigger ballroom. Or maybe he wanted to get away from a hospital wing named after his father. Or the echoes of an explosion in the Land Down Under. I didn't ask. And he's not a talkative man, my partner.

But I did hear a story. The week before he left, Paul stopped by the Huron Harbor cemetery office and told the sexton he wanted the eternal flame on Dutch Osterlan's grave turned off every night at dusk. The sexton thought it was an odd request, and I did too. Until I did a little research. Did you know that nyctophobia, fear of the dark, isn't an acquired trait?

It's inherited.

UNSOLVED

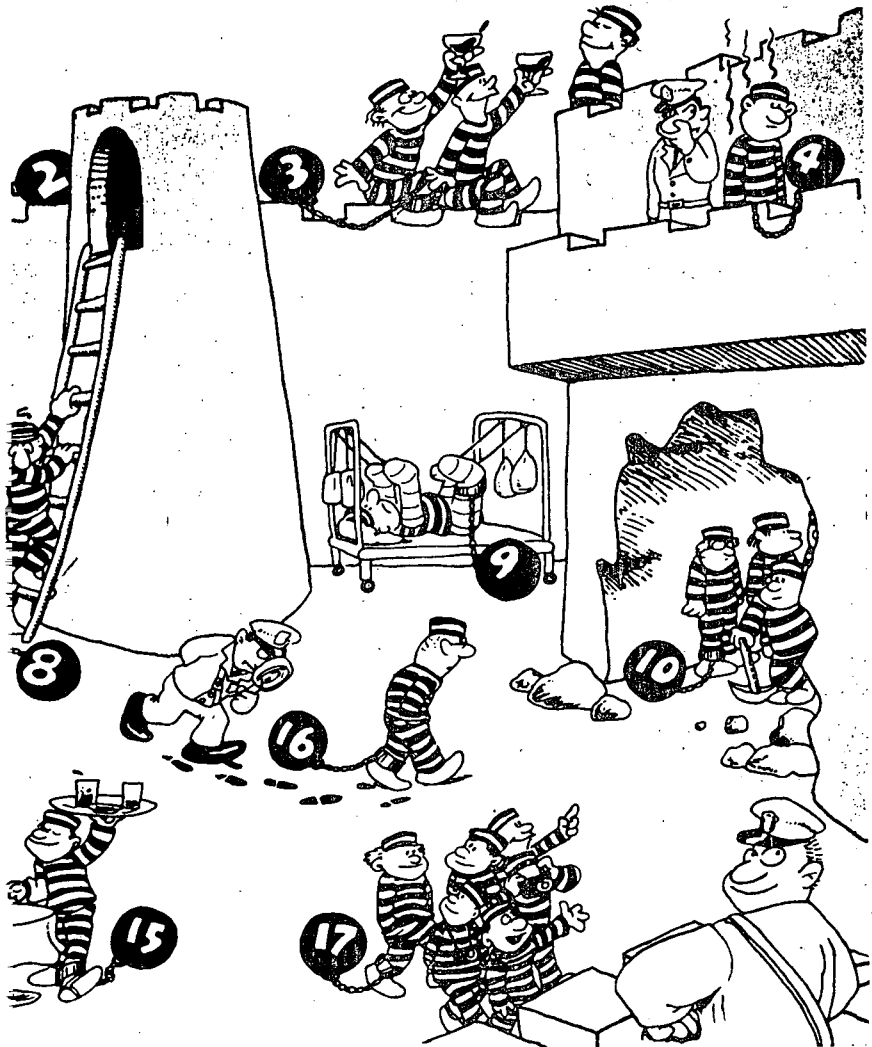
by Robert
Leighton

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

All the prisoners in this yard are doing time for visual punning without a license. Poetic license, that is. Each con or group of cons illustrates a word that begins with the syllable *con*. Prisoner 1, for example, illustrates *CONTROL* ("con troll"), while 2 is *CONGESTING* ("con jest-ing"). You are hereby sentenced to identify the others or to face 15 years of punishment. Confused? Just concentrate.



The answer will appear in the October issue.

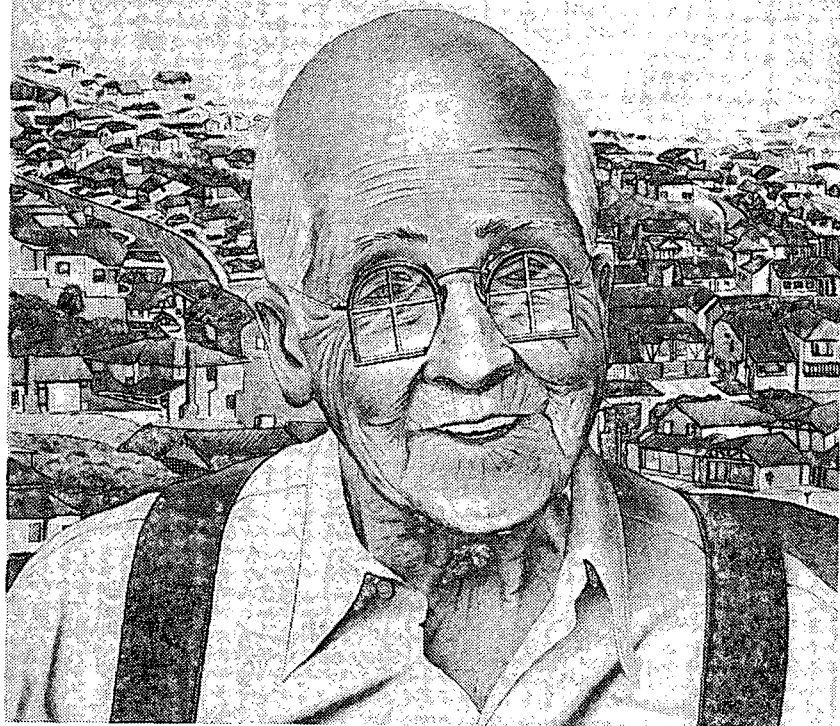


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FICTION

The Ubiquitous Uncle

by Allen M. Widem



Time was, when this town was really a small place, you *knew* everybody and everybody knew, well, that the city, to which folks drawing a paycheck every week commuted, would never have the marvelously relaxed lifestyle we've had.

But, you know, nothing stays the same, and, yes, the small town stopped being a small town. Eight miles to the city and suddenly, well, you guessed it. Construction, and not all of it condos, either, it sprang up like it'd never end and besides, even if it does, people say, noth-

ing'll ever be the same, the small town feeling, they say.

I'm into real estate. Started at my dad's lumber yard, and my dad's big brother, that's Henry, he ran and he still runs the *Gazette*, that's the local paper, used to be a broadsheet, you know, full-sized and everything, once a week, and now, well, it's tabloid-sized and it's out two times a week and I don't care if Uncle Henry's pushing eighty, he'll see it become a daily before he steps aside.

Now, what's a real estate pitchman like me—Emma, that's my wife, she doesn't like to have me call myself a pitchman, but I am, I pitch sales, and I only tell her I'm a pitchman, nobody else, nobody—doing telling you about this town, which sits up against a mountain range that used to be all trees and green and now, well, you come to our town, there's buildings all over it. All over. That's why I'm telling you. A *great* town to live in.

Now, my dad, that was George, gone twenty-five years now, used to say that when my Uncle Henry made up his mind, nothing could ever change his mind.

And, oh, a few weeks ago, I was sitting at my desk, and Janey, that's my Gal Friday and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and half-day Saturday, she answered the phone

and she put her hand over the phone receiver and said it was my Uncle Henry and she wanted to know if I was in or out?

Of course, I nodded, and reached for the phone that's on my desk, and I said, "Good morning, Uncle Henry!" and he said, "Now, Jack, you're in the business and you're going to tell me, right now, this instant, is there an insurance company moving from the city to the Perkins farm property, and if there is, are you the agent of record or do I call Sarah over at Town Hall and find out who?"

I answered straight off. I wasn't the agent of record for the Perkins property. My gosh (I reminded Uncle Henry), that property's been up for sale for a good four or five years.

"What's so good about land not selling for four or five years?" Uncle Henry asked.

"A figure of speech," I said. I nearly bit my tongue. Why fool with words when it comes to my Uncle Henry? He likes those page one banner headlines, especially with a story the morning paper in the city didn't get. Only one paper left in the city. Morning. The afternoon, it shut up shop. Not enough advertising, Uncle Henry had told me.

"Who's handling it?" Uncle Henry persisted. "Do you know or do I call Sarah?"

"Let me check it out," I of-

ferred. "Somebody I know is bound to know something."

I promised to call him back right away. "As soon as you can!" he exclaimed. "We're right on deadline, Jack!"

I promised. I knew I had. But it didn't enter into the scheme of things. Janey, she let out a shriek. Meow, her cat, Meow had scooted out the door just then and headed for the street, and, of course, I had to give chase. I fell on the sidewalk in my haste and Meow took off into shrubbery and I had to get myself up from the sidewalk and limp back into the office and the phone rang again, and, yes, it was Uncle Henry. Again.

"What's the word, Jack?" he boomed. "We're right down to the wire on this one. Herb, you know, Herb Witherspoon, one of the best ad men you'll ever meet in American journalism, he's got a crackerjack of an idea for a special supplement, and he's standing right here, only I want to put that Perkins piece on page one . . . my sources tell me it's a go."

"Hold it for one complete minute," I said, trying to sound calm, trying not to feel foolish for having plopped down on the sidewalk in front of my office. "You're concerned about a piece of property that's been fallow all these years and all you know, Uncle Henry, you're on

deadline, on deadline, and, my gosh! I fell a minute ago. Did you know that?"

"The property, Jack. Who's selling? I've got to know!"

"I don't know," I said bluntly. "I haven't phoned anybody. At least not yet. I'll . . . I'll put in a call to Chester Perkins. He went to high school with me . . . running that dairy now . . . I'll call you back. Five minutes, okay?"

I dialed Chester's private number at the dairy. And as I dialed, I kind of smiled to myself. Sure, Uncle Henry's pushing eighty, but he doesn't like to call the folks at Town Hall because when he calls, somebody's just bound to be hanging around from the city paper and hear something and find out something before Uncle Henry's gotten the story, whatever, into his precious *Gazette*.

Chester's private number was going bzz-bzz-bzz. I hung up the receiver, and whammo! there was the insistent voice of you-know-who wanting to know how much the land was selling for, and, of course, I said, again, to wait a complete minute because I hadn't gotten through to my source.

Janey was all smiles again when I looked up. Meow, her cat, she'd come back on her own.

I couldn't reach Chester, but,

no, no way was that property his granddad developed going to be sold. No, no, no. I'd have heard.

Uncle Henry didn't like what I had to tell him. Said right away that he (Uncle Henry) thought Chester Perkins, boyhood chum of mine, was hiding something because the dairy was probably going to be sold off and Chester, boyhood chum of mine, wasn't as town loyal as Chester could be, if he wanted to be. Uncle Henry had heard *that*.

I sighed as I looked down at Meow, going at some milk out of a saucer on my office floor. Any second, I knew, Uncle Henry'd say something I didn't want to hear him say. He did. I was out the door, calling over my shoulder to Janey, who was busy petting Meow. Got to drive my uncle out to the Perkins place. Janey shouted something just as I slammed our front office door. Probably about me, the boss, not appreciating Meow's cuddliness.

I saw Uncle Henry stomping up and down on the sidewalk in front of the *Gazette*. Nephew Jack was a mite late. To take Uncle Henry on an Uncle Henry errand. My dad's big brother. Never tell your dad's big brother you're too busy for anything. Never. But *he's* too, to ever have gotten a driver's license.

On the way out, oh, I usually drive out to Perkins land—and there's a lot of it in this town—down Elm, where I've my office, up Shuttle Meadow, and then along Hawthorne, just in case you're passing through and want to know how to get from downtown to Perkins country; Uncle Henry, he was chattering away. About Lois, mostly. They've dated forty years. She's a born bachelorette. He's a born bachelor.

"Lois," Uncle Henry said pleasantly enough, "made some delicious apple pie Sunday week."

"Oh," I said.

"I didn't get over there, though, Jack. Had to watch the toy sailboat race over on Keney Pond."

"Then," I asked, my eyes on the sparse traffic on Shuttle Meadow (and, please, you come to town, remember there's a rotten curve, past the Curtis place, okay?), "how did you know it was delicious?"

"Oh," Uncle Henry chuckled to himself, "anybody's tasted her pie once remembers it always."

I pulled into the driveway going to the Perkins farmhouse. Oh, you might ask, what's a fast-building suburban town like this doing with a farmhouse plunked in prime residential? If you're into Perkins

money, I might tell you, you do what you please.

I rang the bell and stepped back, waiting for somebody to come to the front door. Useless errand, I told myself. Nobody's here this time of year. More likely to find one of them down in the Caribbean than here. More likely. But nobody *lives* here any more.

I turned towards my car. Uncle Henry was sitting there in my car, notebook in hand. I could see it in hand. He was having a good time, he had a pencil out and he was scribbling.

Uncle Henry's the politest one. He put the pencil down, gave me a sorrowful look. Nope, that sorrowful look told me, property's safe and solid. No sale. Leastways not now. *No* sprucing up, you see.

"Uncle Henry," I began, measuring my words, "you knew there'd be nobody here and yet you knew I wouldn't turn you down for a ride and you knew . . ."

"Jack," my Uncle Henry said with a piercing look, "don't sound like your dad, okay? I came out to dig around, figure an angle for a story about a prime piece of real estate that's about to be sold. This is the last solid piece of prime real estate in this town. You know it and I know it, and sooner or later,

I'm going to have to read it in the city paper . . ."

"Uncle Henry," I said, getting back into the car, "I'm going back to my office and I'm going to drop you off at your newspaper before I go back to my office, and when I get to my office, I'll phone Chester again and you know and I know he's not going to be there."

With that, my Uncle Henry tucked pencil in lapel pocket, grabbed the door handle, and got out of my car. "Coming with me?" he asked, genially enough. "I'm going to walk around, do a, um, what we in the business call a mood piece. Besides, Jack, place like this has to have somebody around. Caretaker, maybe . . . I know Chester doesn't live here any more, but somebody does. I used to sneak out here, your dad and me, we were little guys, we'd steal apples. Boy, did we steal apples."

"You just can't stroll around this place!" I pleaded. "This is private property."

"It's the focus of a story I'm developing," he said quickly. "You with me or you against me? Your dad, he was always with me, never against me. . . ."

I reminded my Uncle Henry that (one) I had an office to get back to, and that (two) if I didn't get back I wouldn't have much of an office to get back to, and that (three) if I strolled away

from my car, I wouldn't hear my car-phone and if Chester did try to contact me, I wouldn't be there, now, would I?

We strolled across the vast meadows, my Uncle Henry and I, and while the conversation was a mini-travelogue of what was and never will be again, I enjoyed the sunshine, not too hot, either, this time of year, coming through the few clouds. You visit our town, be sure to stay at the Stanton. Tab's fairly reasonable, and they've got a marvelous lobby full of vintage photos of meadows that were and now are condo-lands, plus.

We paused in the apple orchard. And, of course, my Uncle Henry, he had to go and remind me of when he and his brother, that was my dad, George, would steal apples.

"You left your notebook, your pad, whatever, back in the car," I gently reminded this seventy-nine-year-old bachelor. "How're you going to make notes?"

"Oh," he said, loftily I thought, "I'll remember. I'll remember to remember . . ."

We both paused, stunned by the sight. There, lying face up, against shrubbery. Chester. Chester Perkins, scion of the Perkins heritage, farmland and dairy. He was a mess, shirt undated with blood.

"Now," I said tersely. "We've got to get back to my car . . . call

the police . . . now, Uncle Henry. *Now.*"

I'm in real estate. I've told you already. Okay, I'll tell you again, only to tell you I was astonished at how quickly that deserted road filled with vehicles, everything, after I phoned Bart Mathers at our town's P.D. And even as I stood there, mesmerized, kind of, while my Uncle Henry was scurrying about, I was thinking of Chester, my high school classmate, he was dead, he was really dead, and this winter, no, never, he wouldn't be in the Caribbean on one of the Perkins boats.

I finally got around to calling Emma. She'd been a classmate of Chester's, too, and I didn't know what to say, to begin with. But I finally said something. And I called my office. Told Janey to close up, take Meow, and go on home. I wouldn't be going in. Not for the day. No way.

I bugged my Uncle Henry, time and again. Time to get you out of here. All this mud, and all these people, they flock in like vultures, man's dead, Chester Perkins is dead, and you know, Uncle Henry, that's a puzzler. Who'd go ahead and shoot Chester? Everybody in town's known him. Never heard a bad word about him. Never.

I shrugged my shoulders after a while. Uncle Henry wasn't

about to leave. He wanted, what? A mood piece. That's what the news game calls it. And I listened in on remarks from our police chief, that's Bart Mathers. Came back from living out west a while back. Bought a house through my office, too. I got him a very comfortable mortgage. Good neighborhood. It'll be that way for years, I told him. And I really hope it is.

I finally convinced my seventy-nine-year-old bachelor uncle to drive back into the town center with me.

I left him off at the *Gazette*. He got out of the car and he leaned in and said he'd been thinking. Edition supposed to get out today. He'd forget it. Go for the big marbles tomorrow. He'd look pretty rural if he came out with an edition and the morning paper in the city had it all wrapped up.

I went back to the office after all, but I couldn't concentrate. I stared at the phone. It seemed to stare back at me. Chester, so much to live for, and on and with. Cindy, their two girls, both married a while now, California, last time Chester spoke about them to me. We were in the same class. Chester, Emma, me.

Cindy, though, she was on the six o'clock news from the city. I hadn't seen her in a long,

long while. Moved up here from New York, you see, thirty years ago, fashion coordinator, something, Stanley's Department Stores, met Chester, and he'd swept her off her feet. He was the first of our high school crowd to get married, you know.

Seven, seven-thirty, I told Emma, that's my wife, the decent thing, both of us, go over to Chester's townhouse, condolence call, decent thing to do.

Of course, I told myself, driving over to the townhouse—it's the most distinguished one in that cluster just past the town square, you see—and I parked, and, right away, fellow in a spiffy uniform, he came out of nowhere and said he'd park it for me, and I helped Emma out of her side of the car and we went up the walk and found ourselves in the living room of the townhouse, and it was jammed, lot of people standing around and talking, and I spotted Cindy, sitting, handkerchief at her eyes, and I touched Emma on the elbow and we edged our way over and I stood there for a moment, and, finally, she looked up, and she saw me and she saw Emma and she let out a shriek, "Oh, dear! dear! Why'd this happen to us, Jack? Why?"

No, you can't comfort much in a situation like this. Sure, you try. Everybody tries. But,

let's be honest, okay? You can squeeze a hand, kiss a person, and deep down, you're at a loss to say much more than a few words.

I lifted my head. Coming in the front door, looking like they'd stepped out of *Vogue* or something, the daughters. I'd remembered them. Knew them as kids, remember. And two big strapping fellows, they were following the two. Polly, yes, Polly, the older, and Susie, and in a minute, the girls were crying, there with their mother.

Emma and me, we stayed around, you know, speaking very quietly with this one and that one. All the while I found myself looking over at the two hulks who'd come in the front door with Polly and Susie Perkins. No, I didn't know their married names. Kind of relationship, friendship, I had with Chester, well, he'd pick up and take off for a bit of skiing in Switzerland, and Emma and me, we'd plunk our tootsies in the sand in Florida for two whole days and Janey, she'd be on the phone, Hoskins called, Heatherton called, and she hadn't even gone through the alphabet yet. I'd have to fly back.

Finally, one of the big fellows, he came over, and he nodded at me and extended a hand. I shook his hand, and he said

the family wanted me as a pall-bearer and I said sure, and when and where, and he told me, and he walked away, back to where the Perkins girls and Cindy were sitting.

We went home after a while and Emma heated up some water for instant coffee and I was about to pour the water when good old Uncle Henry was on the phone, bubbling over with ideas, ideas he said were bound to lead to a killer, and I told him, wait a minute, Uncle Henry, got to turn the water off, and I put the phone down and when I came back the line was dead. He'd hung up on me. My seventy-nine-year-old bachelor uncle.

Now, there's one thing you've got to understand about my family. Loyalty's number one. I told Emma I'd have to get to my Uncle Henry, by phone or otherwise, and after six tries, maybe more, I knew what I'd known all along that day. My Uncle Henry was going to find a killer. Or, at least, try to.

I drove straight down to the *Gazette*. He lives there, practically.

He was there, feet propped up on that battered desk of his, yakking away on the phone. He waved when I came in. Front door was open, nobody else in the place but him and me, and he'd left the front door open,

pitch dark outside in the alley.

My Uncle Henry hung up after a bit of shouting at somebody about not knowing a particle from a predicate.

"What was that all about?" I asked, leaning against the desk.

"Oh," he said with a grin, "that's Lou Hotchkiss, you know, the car dealer, Lefty Louie we used to call him, and he's got this thing about crossword puzzles. Buys the most out-of-town papers of all the people I know. Plays the crosswords. Even does the *New York Times* Sunday. That's the biggie, he says. . . . He needed an eight-letter word to do with particle. I gave it to him. Nearly gave me a bad time. Wanted to use 'predicate' without the 'e'. You know me and crossword puzzles."

"What ideas are your follow-through thoughts following, Uncle Henry?" I wanted to know.

"Glad you came down, Jack," he said in return. "I'm going to go out to the Perkins place . . ."

"The townhouse or the farm?"

"The farm, of course," he said, getting out of his battered chair. "That's what I called you for in the first place."

"You can't do that," I countered.

"I can and I will," he assured me. He reached into a lower desk drawer, brought out a lan-

tern, held it aloft. "See," he purred, "I'm prepared for all emergencies. My lady friend, she gave me this one summer. Wanted to go on the town lake in a rowboat at midnight. I didn't want to. I can't stand mosquitoes, especially at midnight. And I didn't even bother to find out if there *are* mosquitoes out there at midnight."

If there's one thing I've come to understand about my Uncle Henry, it's something called marriage-shy. He's perfected it to state-of-the-art negative. *She's* a smart lady lawyer, did I tell you that? Well, she is. And she wanted to pay for a honeymoon in California, the way I understand it, twenty, thirty years ago, but he pleaded busy-busy, special edition, something, and after that an investigative series. She loves him, though. She really does.

We started for the Perkins farm, my Uncle Henry and me, and on the way out we passed a cruiser of our town's finest and I tooted the horn and pulled in front of him and I got out of the car and I went back to the cruiser and it was Robert Pringle, Hudson's boy, and I know the boy from when he was a toddler, and when I casually said we were going to the Perkins farm, he said that'd be strictly a no-no, got a cruiser out there and everything.

Of course, he called P.D. headquarters and said what I'd said and Bart Mathers, the P.D. chief himself, he barked back he was on his way, he'd meet us, and don't do anything out of line, okay?

A cruiser was parked in the driveway and the P.D. had strung up some lights in front of the house, floodlights. I mean, Chester, *he* hadn't lived there in how long? Years and years, that's how long. Oh, I suppose my Uncle Henry would criticize me on that. Be specific, he'd say if I asked. I didn't. About how many years ago Chester moved into that super-duper townhouse. How would I know, really. *I* wasn't the agent of record, you know.

Now, my Uncle Henry's not shy. Maybe I haven't told you that, but I can remember, going with my dad, over to Board of Aldermen's meetings in Town Hall, back in the days when we had the lumber yard, and there was my Uncle Henry badgering somebody on the board about something and somebody snapping back at my Uncle Henry, oh, nasty things like, go put a new ribbon in your typewriter and let it be yellow, and my Uncle Henry ribbing the nasty one right back. Fair's fair.

Well, anyway, Bart Mathers was out there before you could say, "Well, where's the chief,

anyway?" or something like that, and he pulled to a smart stop next to me, and he had a discussion with the *Gazette* editor, that's my Uncle Henry, about the downright foolishness, nighttime, of poking around for something where a lot of poking around's been ground down.

"I'll tell you, Bart," my Uncle Henry said. "I knew your dad, your granddad, and I faintly remember your great-granddad, and none of them, none of those Mathers boys, they'd ask the *Gazette* what you just asked the *Gazette*!"

"Henry..." Bart said in measured, very measured tones, "I'm not violating your First Amendment rights to free speech."

"Well," my Uncle Henry said grudgingly, very grudgingly, "you sure as shooting sound like it, Bart. I'm looking around, Nephew Jack here, we're peaceful citizens, out for a peaceful citizens' stroll. *Do you mind?*"

"Henry," the chief retorted, not unkindly I want you to understand, "this is no place for a stroll. It's miles from the town green. You know it. I know it."

My Uncle Henry, I've got to tell you, he reached into my car and brought out that lantern his lady friend gave him, twenty, thirty years back. "Could ... could we browse through

the house, Bart?" he asked. "I'd love to do that. None of the TV people, none of them went inside . . ."

"Henry," was the calm response, "the house is locked. You know it. I know it. Nobody's lived here for years."

"Please . . ."

"Henry . . ."

"Pretty please . . ."

"Henry . . ."

"With sugar and spice and everything nice . . ."

"Henry . . . what was top left, first four spaces, the crossword this morning . . . preposition start . . ."

"Bart," my Uncle Henry said, almost admiringly, "I've got to hand it to you. You're almost as good on the uptake as your granddad. Was he Bart Three or Bart Junior?"

"I'm Bart Three, Henry . . . *you know.*"

"I'd like to go inside, Bart."

"No. Sorry. But no."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"Can I . . . Nephew Jack here . . . take my lantern here and go out to where . . . we found him . . . Chester Perkins?"

"No."

"Why not? You're as stubborn as your dad, you know."

"My dad wasn't stubborn. I understand your dad was. That's what people tell me, Henry."

"I'm putting the lantern back into Nephew Jack's car, Bart," my Uncle Henry said resignedly. "I'm going back into town and I'm going to write a libelous editorial about the lack of cooperative responsibility on the part of this growing community's law enforcement department . . ."

"Henry, go over to the Perkins townhouse, huh?" the chief suggested. "Talk to Cindy. You know her. You know everybody here. She saw Chester in the morning, and she says he wanted to be left alone. She says . . . I didn't tell the newspaper people who were here before. I'm telling you, okay?"

"Bart, it's going on nine o'clock. Kind of late to talk to a grieving widow. Even a grieving widow I know."

"I was only kidding about a libelous editorial, Bart," my Uncle Henry said, rather sheepishly. "I'd like you to know."

"Oh," Bart Mathers assured him, "I knew it. I knew it all along. . . . Go ahead, with Jack here, sure, go over to the townhouse. People still there when I passed by there minutes ago. But isn't your paper out today?"

"No," my Uncle Henry assured him. "We declared a moratorium. Tomorrow. Tomorrow we publish today's paper. Twice a week, you know. . . . I kind of

hoped we'd have a real humdin-ger for page one, Bart . . . "

I drove back into town, just muttering a "Yes" and "Isn't that interesting?" as my Uncle Henry talked of Bart Mathers' dad and granddad and the family hardware business. I had a fleeting thought, fleeting, that's all it was, about asking my Uncle Henry, why *not* get married? Dating his lady friend all these years and years and years. Isn't it time already?

I trudged from the adjacent, jammed parking area into the townhouse. My Uncle Henry had insisted on being left off in front. "After nine, Jack," he reminded me. "Well after. Lady here, grieving and everything, she's going to get some sleep pretty quick. Larry's Service gassed her up at twelve noon. Larry himself told . . . I'll go in ahead. Park the car. That's a great nephew, Jack. Great. You're my only nephew. That makes you even greater." My Uncle Henry, newspaperman all his life. Knows how to fill out printed space.

Of course, fellow in spiffy uniform came out of nowhere, offered to park for me, but I said no, thank you, but no, I'd rather . . . And he bowed and stepped away. You pay high rent, you get high respect, car-parking, things like that.

Somebody was serving coffee.

Nine thirty-five, and the Perkins townhouse had the coffee cups ready, all in a row.

I took a cup from a maid. Pretty little thing. Looked like Hazel somebody, girl I went to high school with. These townhouse people, they've arrived in huge crowds, past ten years. Pity I never got any of the real estate end. Lots of local folks working, maids, laundresses, that kind of thing.

I sipped. Over in a corner, tools of the trade, notebook, pencil poised, my Uncle Henry, and chattering, animatedly, Cindy Perkins. Looked none the worse for the day's tale of woe. Not really. Outwardly, anyway.

I fell into conversation with George Rowen, he's the general manager of Perkins Dairies. Yes, we both agreed, Chester, he had everything to live for.

The Perkins girls, Polly, Susie, they came over then, and we tried, they, me, to renew acquaintance. It'd been a long time, long, long, since we three had last met. Not their fault. Not mine. But, hey, they'd come over and we talked, and both of them said they'd never move back to this town, especially after what happened to . . .

One of those tall drinks of water came out from the kitchen about then and made a beeline for Polly and, without a by-

your-leave, or a try at sounding like he'd ever even heard of Emily Post or Dorothy Manners, he said it was time for them to go back into the city. Susie, wordlessly, swirled, walked away.

"Creight . . ." Polly said, ever so softly. "I'd like to stay here a bit longer . . ."

"Polly," he snapped, a hand on her arm, "I've got some phone calls coming in from California at our hotel . . ."

"Call the hotel," she said wearily. "Tell them to transfer the calls here. We can stay here tonight . . ."

"I want to get back to the hotel," he said evenly. I could see him tightening his grip. It *had* to be his wife. A mere date, an acquaintance, she'd have kicked him in the shins. That grip of his, it had to be tight, very.

She gave him a nasty look. "Creight," she growled, trying to keep her voice down. "You're hurting me. My dad's dead, remember. My dad. You're losing your shirt in a movie deal nobody in the business would ever encourage you to get into . . . but not you. You're in the credits. Associate producer. Big deal. Big loss, honey."

"Polly," he muttered, "I've got to get back to the hotel. *Now*." He nodded brusquely. "Please excuse us, but . . ."

"Take your paw off my arm," she said. "Get into a bedroom,

someplace, call the hotel."

"No." His eyes flashed defiance.

My Uncle Henry was at my elbow suddenly. He had tucked the notebook *and* the pencil away.

"You know," my Uncle Henry said to this tall drink of water, impeccable in dress, tanned, trim, "you remind me of a movie actor . . ."

The man who'd been called Creight, he shook his head as he loosened his grip, finally, on Polly's arm. "No," he said, leveling his gaze at my seventy-nine-year-old bachelor uncle. "I'm not into acting . . ."

"Somehow," my Uncle Henry persisted, "you remind me of an actor. Now, I had a cousin, Crampton, Walter Crampton, you may have heard of him. He told me, once, oh, it's got to be a lot of years ago. He was an extra in a movie at RKO. The star was Ned Sparks."

"That's all very interesting, mister," the husband of the former Polly Perkins intoned. "But we've got to get going . . ."

My Uncle Henry's not one to walk away from repartee. "Walter was a comic's comic, you see. He'd been a stand-up straightman. Vaudeville, mostly. But, then, he drifted out to Hollywood."

"We've got to get going . . ."

My Uncle Henry was right

there with a retort. "Well," he said expansively, "my nephew Jack here and me, we've got a car . . . you need a ride, you've got a ride. Isn't that so, Jack?"

I nodded. My Uncle Henry speaks, I answer. Otherwise, it's at least fifteen minutes about somebody in long-ago journalism who did something naughty enough to bring down disgrace on a major newspaper someplace. No time to write a shorter story.

"Thank you," this Creight said. "But *we* have a car outside. . . . Polly . . . can we go?" There was anxiety in his hazel-green eyes.

Polly looked over at her mother, apparently engrossed in conversation with George Rowens. "I'd like to say good night, *something*, to Mom, Creight . . ." she said. "We should stay . . . but . . . you want to drive into the city, hey, I'll come along. I want to be back here first thing in the morning . . ."

"Sure, sure," he said. "I'll . . . I'll be outside, I'll get hold of that driver, make sure he's behind the wheel of the car when you come out, okay?"

"Sure, sure," Polly said. She sounded, well, she looked, too, like all she wanted to do, all she ever wanted to do was to please the man Creight, whoever and whatever he was. She watched

him step away smartly.

"We'll be going, too, Pol," I said quietly, winking at my Uncle Henry, looking as energetic at ten at night as he did early, early morning. "Uncle Henry, isn't it time I dropped you off at your place . . ."

"Sure, sure," he said at once. That Uncle Henry, he'd have been great as a mimic. I think. Sure, sure.

My Uncle Henry and I stepped out into the coolness of evening. Funny, I told myself, I hadn't noticed the coolness before. But then I hadn't been to a deserted farm on which a childhood chum was found dead before, either.

We strode across the vastness of the parking area abutting those handsome, so very, town-houses, and standing under a domed light was the man Creight, pacing more than he was waiting.

And at five past ten P.M., our time, three hours later than five past seven P.M., western time, the man Creight seemed perplexed, and very.

"Something wrong?" That was my Uncle Henry. Always with the leading question.

"Stupid, stupid driver!" Creight snarled. "Took off, without telling me. Stupid! Stupid!"

"Can *we* give you a lift?" That was my Uncle Henry. My car. My time. But he was making

with the invite. My dad would have loved to hear that.

"Naw," was the hostile retort. "Stupid'll be back. I hired a service. I didn't hire a car jock to bug off . . ."

"Perhaps," my Uncle Henry said grandly, "he's, what do you people call it in California, cruising, something like that? Wouldn't you say something like that, Jack?"

I shrugged. I felt the weariness of the day and the chill of the evening. Emma was probably waiting up for me. I had a load of business to take care of in the morning—a load of business I'd neglected this very day.

The former Polly Perkins came out of the townhouse. "Creight!" she called as she moved swiftly towards us.

"Polly," he said sternly, "that driver *and* car I hired took off. How do you like that?"

"Sure he didn't go for coffee or something, Creight?" she pondered. "I mean, it's a small town, smaller than L.A., certainly. . . . I'll bet, I'll just bet he's down at the Center Diner. Is there still a Center Diner here?"

My Uncle Henry quickly assured the former Polly Perkins that, yes, the Center Diner was still very much in business. As a matter of fact, it was still advertising in the *Gazette*, page two, lower right-hand corner.

Thirty-six years, same spot. Trouble with my Uncle Henry, and I love him, I really do, ask him what time it is, and, yes, he tells you how the watch works.

"I never told that creep," the man Creight said to no one in particular as I drove to the Center Diner, "about what time we'd be going back to the city . . . but, Pol, it's not L.A. here, is it?"

"No, dear," she murmured. "There!" she exclaimed, as we moved down the street. "Isn't that it? The one we rented, Creight?"

"Yes! *Well*, nothing ventured, nothing gained. I'll tell him to *have* his coffee, take the car back to wherever he was assigned to it . . . you fellows, you don't mind driving us to the Roberts, do you? I don't want anything to do with a man who doesn't stick around. I don't . . ."

"Creight," Polly interposed, "you're overreacting. It's been a terrible day for all of us." She sobbed for all of a moment. "And, Jack . . . you really don't mind, do you, taking us to the Roberts?"

"Pull up," Creight barked. "I want to tell him off, he's got to be inside this creepy diner, and I want to get my briefcase. It's in the car. I left it there, like a stupid, stupid . . ."

"Don't criticize yourself," Polly

pleaded. "Please don't, honey . . . I love you."

I pulled up close to the rental car. Long, sleek, like California Mod, transplanted east. Somehow it needed California sunshine, balmy Pacific breezes. Only here it was, well after ten at night, there was a cold chill in the air, and the man Creight *had* to get his briefcase. Had to.

My Uncle Henry, sitting up front with me, hadn't said a word for at least five minutes. Looking over at him, I saw he wasn't snoozing, either. I didn't expect that, anyway. Old crossword puzzle man like him. I know he stays up half the night, devouring, literally, word meanings in dictionaries.

I rolled my window down as this fellow Creight (and he'd never been introduced to me, not even a whisper) got out of my car. I didn't want to pull away. Out of politeness, I guess, to the memory of Chester Perkins. This fellow stomped over to the rental, there in the parking lot, grabbed at a door handle. It wouldn't give.

Next, well, I saw him storming into the diner and he came right out with a fellow in a chauffeur's outfit, and they were arguing loudly.

My Uncle Henry got into the act. I blinked my eyes once, and there he was in the lot, holding out a hand to the chauffeur, and the chauffeur was pumping that

hand right away, not listening to this Creight any more, and my Uncle Henry booming, "Hi ya, Sid!"

I got out of the car, too, and so did Polly, and Creight, he kind of sidled up to Polly, mouthing threats about Sid, and my Uncle Henry, he came over to Polly, Creight, and me, with Sid, and he said, "Jack! You've got to meet Sid Merrill!"

And, of course, I met Sid Merrill, shook hands, and while I knew right then and there he wasn't in a mood to listen to any real estate sales pitch, I gave him a hearty "Hi" because, well, my Uncle Henry is kind of special to me, you see.

Sid Merrill, it turned out, was an old pal of my Uncle Henry's. I'd figured that out already. What I hadn't figured was that, as I learned standing there, Sid and my Uncle Henry go 'way back, forty, fifty years.

"Hey!" Creight sang out. "This isn't old home week. Get the car open, buster, and get me my briefcase."

Sid Merrill flashed him a grin. "I've done better than that, yes, sir! I put that briefcase you had on the seat into the trunk. For safekeeping."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Open the trunk and get it."

"Now?"

"Now."

My Uncle Henry spoke up.

"Jack," he said, "Sid's a song writer. Right, Sid?"

"Right, Henry!"

"And, Sid," my Uncle Henry boomed, "I guess you're hacking it with a driver's job between song bits, right?"

"Sort of," Sid Merrill chirped.

"*Open the trunk.*" This was Creight. California Mod. Looking madder by the minute.

Sid Merrill made a kind of showy production, getting the limo keys out of a jacket pocket, continuing to chit-chat with my Uncle Henry. "I'm only filling in, you see, Henry . . ."

Creight didn't wait for Sid Merrill to hand him the briefcase. He grabbed at it.

"Hey, mister," Sid Merrill said firmly. "That's *my* briefcase you got there."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Now give it to me . . ." Sid Merrill reached for what he had claimed to be his briefcase. "Yours . . ." he added quickly, to California Mod, "it's back here . . . yeah . . ."

Creight held onto the briefcase just handed him and finally told Sid Merrill off but good. "You've got a nerve leaving me and my wife like that back there. You're supposed to wait . . ."

"Hey, mister," was the jovial response. "This isn't my bag, driving, you know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Hey," Creight stormed, opening the briefcase. "This isn't mine, either . . . what kind of a kook are you?"

"Well, whaddaya know!" Sid Merrill chortled. "That's my wife's. Hen, you remember Clara?"

"Sure!" my Uncle Henry sang out. "Great musician . . ."

"Teaches piano. Still. This is hers."

"Where's mine?" Creight exploded. "Real kook . . ."

Sid Merrill stood there, blocking further exploration of the limo's trunk. "You know something, mister, not once, all day today, you never once offered me a cuppa coffee, anything. The car, it's been muddied up bad, and I've got to get it to a car wash before I go back to the garage, and the rental outfit, they're not going to reimburse me for the car wash. I'll write a song, someday, I will. How to deadbeat a deadbeat . . ."

Creight swung at the little man then, swung at him fiercely, and Sid Merrill, give a guy, got to be close to eighty, maybe more, credit, he swung back, but good, and then Sid Merrill, reeling from another Creight fist slam, reached into the trunk and grasped yet another briefcase and tossed it at Creight.

I didn't know if I should get

our local P.D. on my car-phone or not. The encounter had drawn a good-sized crowd already. What if some of my customers, my *good*, bill-paying customers, are in the, um, audience?

Sid Merrill rested against a fender as Creight whipped out some keys and snapped the lid up on the briefcase, grumbling all the time.

Sid Merrill, self-professed professional song writer, made his move then. He shoved his weight against Creight, the thrust throwing Creight off balance, sending the contents of Creight's briefcase onto the parking lot surface and triggering a "Go get 'em!" kind of call from the assembling crowd.

I hunkered down to assist, to pick up what Sid Merrill's latest onslaught had wrought. My Uncle Henry, Sid Merrill, Polly, even Creight, did likewise.

The former Polly Perkins let out a shriek. "Honey!" she exclaimed. "*What's Perkins Pictures Corporation?*"

Creight made a grab for the portfolio she had in hand. "It's

nothing, Pol . . . nothing at all . . ."

Her voice rose. "You trying to get my dad to invest in another dummy company? You try that again?"

This *was* an evening for tussling. The former Polly Perkins shoved Creight then. The crowd, still standing by, let out shouts of encouragement. In the distance, I could hear a police siren. Somebody'd called the P.D. I knew somebody would.

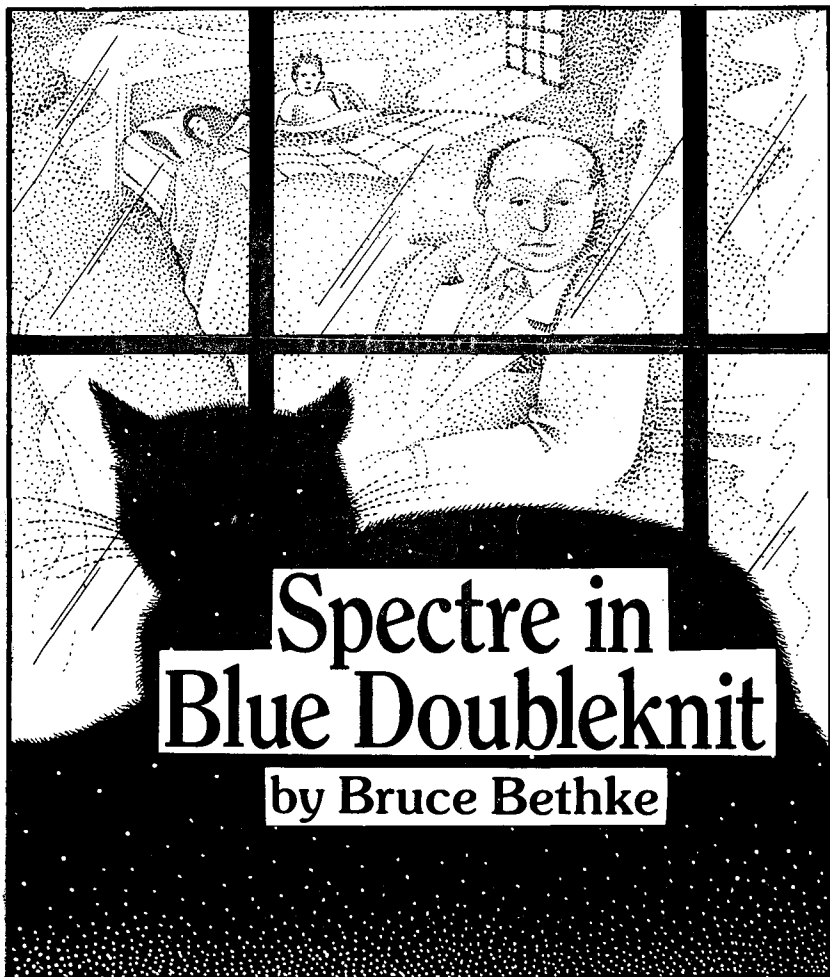
Creight landed against me, of all people. I felt steel then. Instinct, somehow, told me what it was. "*It's a gun!*" I shouted.

Two men hurled themselves, ker-plop, on California Mod then. My Uncle Henry and songwriter-optimist Sid Merrill.

The *Gazette* had record circulation the next day.

On page one, my Uncle Henry printed a boxed quote. Something by Kin Hubbard that goes, "There's not much to be seen in a little town, but what you hear makes up for it."

Now, if you're interested in a house . . .



Spectre in Blue Doubleknit

by Bruce Bethke

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he found Richard and Louisa sprawled on the bed, asleep. Quietly, so as not to disturb them, he stepped out of the bed-

room and wandered through the apartment, correlating.

The tattered green easy chair, the cigarette-scarred sofa, the disorganized heap of textbooks on the coffee table; good. The

pint mason jar of marijuana, the pyramid of empty Schmidt "Sportspak" beer cans, the cold half-cup of coffee etching a ring on the top of the stereo speaker; all was exactly as he had pictured it. He headed for the kitchen, for the final test.

Blue mercury streetlight spilled through the uncurtained windows, allowing him to clearly read the date of the *Tribune* sports section lying on the radiator. May 6, 1975. Perfect. He'd manifested right on target.

He stepped back into the bedroom, and took a gentle moment to compare the dozing man to himself. The sleeper had a full head of thick, curly, brown hair, a smooth, clear, untroubled face, and a trim, muscular, one hundred seventy pound physique. His own body was another story; his hairline had receded clear back to the crown of his head, his ulcer was developing a resistance to Maa-lox, and he couldn't keep his weight under two forty on a bet.

A small twinge of sympathy passed through him as he looked down at the man on the bed. Twenty-two-year-old Richard Luck had such *possibilities* ahead of him. And he was about to toss them all away . . . That thought choked off the sympathy. He leapt up on the bed and kicked young Richard hard in the ribs.

His foot passed right through, of course.

With a modest sigh of disappointment, he lay down through the sleeper and started insinuating himself into the dream.

Richard and Carynne go to Marty's Deli for lunch, and as soon as they get inside the door he sees Louisa working behind the counter. He yells, "I can explain!" but she picks up that enormous knife she uses to slice the French bread, so he grabs Carynne's hand and starts running.

They run across the street, jump the fence, and start through the railroad tunnel, but when they get about halfway he sees his mother coming from the other end. "It's okay, Mom," he says, "I know what I'm doing." She just stands there blocking the end of the tunnel (which has become so narrow he's got to stoop to stand in it), and he can hear Louisa coming up behind, so he turns and drags Carynne down a side passage he hadn't noticed before. They emerge into the corridor by the physics classrooms in the basement of North Hall and round the corner to find the stairwell door locked from the other side, so Carynne pulls him into one of the dark classrooms and—my God, how'd she get to be so naked?—and pulls him tight against her smooth,

cool skin, and pulls him down, and pulls him—

The fluorescent lights flare on; he and Carynne are entwined, naked, on the sofa in his parents' basement, and his father is standing there scowling. Except it isn't his father, it's the pudgy guy in the navy blue doubleknit suit! The pudgy guy walks over, picks up Richard's jeans off the floor, throws them at him, and says, "Wake up, dirtball. We need to talk."

"Dammit, you again? Bug off!"

"You can chase wet dreams later. This is important."

"Who *are* you?" Richard demands. "What are you doing here?" Carynne has vanished.

"Is it bigger than a bread-box?" the pudgy guy mocks him. "What do you *think* I'm doing here? This is a premonition. I'm you from twenty years in the future."

"I'm going to look like *that* when I'm forty?" Richard wakes with a start, and finds himself drenched in cold sweat.

No, as Richard lay in the dark thinking about it, maybe he hadn't waked up. He was in his bedroom for sure, in his bed, staring at the ceiling; everything *seemed* real enough, but he was utterly unable to move. He believed the woman sleeping next to him was Louisa, but an effort to roll over and con-

firm that got him nowhere.

And then there was this curious sense of *detachment* he felt. He was lying on the bed, and at the same time lying under the bed among the old sneakers and dust bunnies, and sitting perched like a cat on the windowsill, and gently floating up near the ceiling, noting that the lintel moldings hadn't been cleaned in years. He thought his eyes were open, but the multiple viewpoints cast some doubt on that.

Deep in the back of his head, his rational daytime self panicked and started screaming something about being dead or paralyzed or at the very least psychotic, but Richard ignored the noise. His windowsill self (which was looking more like a cat with every passing moment) had spotted a sort of umbilical cord between his bedded and ceiling selves, and ambled over to investigate. The thought occurred to him then that if he could just get a window open, he'd be able to fly his ceiling self like a kite.

Whatever state his mind was in, it certainly wasn't awake.

"It's called lucid sleep," someone suggested, helpfully. "Your forebrain is awake, but your voluntary nervous system doesn't know that yet."

Richard managed to round up most of his attention and become aware of another pres-

ence in the room. A presence sitting on the foot of his bed, to be exact.

"Hello!" the spectre in the blue polyester suit said cheerfully.

With an unpleasant lack of startle reflex, Richard's eyes didn't snap open. "Omigod," Richard . . . *said*, for lack of a better word. His lips barely moved, no sound came out, and yet the thought was expressed. "Naw. Don't hallucinate like this from pot. Must be still dreaming." He turned his attention out to graze and tried to slide back into deep sleep.

"Stop it!" said the apparition. "Don't drag me back into dreamstate again."

"Give me two good reasons," Richard mumbled.

"Lucid sleep is the only state I can reliably communicate with you in. If you go back to normal sleep I'm just a nightmare."

"A nightmare with lousy timing," Richard corrected. "I was finally going to score with Carynne."

"You want to go back to sleep? Never see me again?"

"Who, *me*?" Richard said, as sarcastically as possible. "Did I say that?"

The apparition leaned in close to bedded Richard's face. "Well, then get *this* through your little pea-sized brain, boy! You won't be rid of me until you hear me out. You don't know *half* the

nightmare I can be!"

With the equivalent of a resigned sigh, Richard turned back from deep sleep. "Okay. Accepting—just for the moment—that this isn't some bizarre twist in the dream, how do you do it? I mean, you've been invading my sleep all week."

"Sympathetic resonance. My consciousness resonates inside your empty head."

"Insults from hallucinations I don't need," Richard snarled. The tiny flare of anger led to a twitch in his leg, which disturbed Louisa. She rolled a bit, *mmp*ed something, and put an arm across Richard's chest.

The apparition bit his lip. "I'm pre-memory, okay? I'm an up-time projection of your own future consciousness. Look, it's all in the Muldoon book; read about it later. I can only hyperdynamize like this for about thirty minutes, so you'll excuse me if I get to the point."

"Aha!" Richard gleefully seized an idea. "I know where you come from. It's that silly parapsychology course, isn't it? I skipped the readings and now my subconscious is punishing me for it." He wished he were awake enough to resolutely cross his arms. "Well, I don't care if I get a Z-minus on the final. I got a B on the mid-term and an A on my paper, so I pass no matter what. I am *not* going to read any more of that garf; I've

got a marketing final to worry about."

"Gah!" The pudgy spectre slapped himself on the forehead. "You *jerk!* Sure, there's so much fluff in the course it says *Do Not Remove Tag Under Penalty of Law* in the syllabus. Some of it is still true. If you—but no, all *you* can think about is Louisa's breasts and Carynne's tight jeans. *I* had to start studying projection all over again when I was thirty-five because *you* took such lousy notes. It took me six years to get here."

Louisa dragged an arm up, pushed a few strands of her long brown hair out of her face, and whimpered, "Whasmatter honey?" before nodding off again.

Richard focused on her, then on the spectre sitting across his knees. "Can she hear?" he whispered.

The pudgy man paled. "Jeez, I hope not. I'm supposed to be manifesting to you only. Maybe there's some spillover."

"Well, try to keep it down, will you?"

"Okay." They stared at each other in uneasy silence until Richard realized the older man was composing himself to deliver a lecture, just as Richard's father used to.

Richard quickly spoke first. "So you're my future, huh? How's IBM doing?" It had the

desired effect; he totally blew away the older man's composure. "Y'see, I figure I can borrow another three grand at two points on my tuition loan and invest—"

"Kid!" the older man barked. "I came here to prevent the biggest mistake in your life. Not to turn a few lousy bucks."

"Slack off, okay?" Richard said defensively. "I mean, I'm having some trouble dealing with this, y'know? It's not every day my future pops in for a chat." Richard let his viewpoint drift back to the cat. He felt comfortable being a cat. "But I do know that if this were *really* happening, I wouldn't miss an opportunity like this. You sure you're my future?" The man just glared.

"Okay. Accepting for the sake of argument that you're who you say you are, don't you know that coming back is absurd? If you convince me to change my future, then the thing you came back to warn me about doesn't happen, so you don't—"

"I'm trying to save his life," the older man growled under his breath, "and he wants to argue jerk-off philosophy with me." He pointed at Richard and raised his voice. "Look, kid, every time you causality paradox I'll say branching alternate time-line. Personally I think you get premonitions from unchosen futures all the time;

you're just too dimwitted to notice them. It took me five tries to get you lucid."

"But if this works, won't you disintegrate or something?"

"I don't know. And frankly I don't care."

Richard whistled low. "That bad, huh?" and watched as the pudgy man slowly, portentously, nodded. "There you go, getting all ominous again. You came *back* from the future, didn't you? That means the world doesn't get nuked into slag in the next twenty years. Hey, I feel better already!"

"Worse things can happen than the end of the world."

"You out of a job?" Richard suggested. "Economy collapse in the late eighties like Greenburg says it will?"

The older man angrily dug his ghost fingers into sleeping Richard's leg. "Is that all you want from the future? Money? Kid, your priorities are *all* screwed up. 'Am I successful?' Sure, I'm successful. I'm national sales manager for IMDC; I make—"

Richard interrupted. "Who?"

"Integrated Micro Data Corp. They don't exist yet."

"Damn." Cat/Richard twitched his tail with vexation. "And how much did you say you earn?" His interest perked up.

"For chrissakes, what difference does it make?"

"I only ask," Richard pointed

out, "because I want to know why a successful man wears such an ugly suit."

"It's part of the projection," the older man explained, patience struggling with exasperation. "I'm not physically here, of course. I can only travel by avatar—symbol—and my avatar is a sweaty guy in a cheap suit. It's not a true image; in the real world I wouldn't be caught dead wearing white patent leather loafers and a matching vest."

"Sure," said the cat, dubiously, "and—"

"Dammit, stop changing the subject! I'm trying to tell you about real happiness!"

"Ah," Richard said, with dawning comprehension. "Now we come to the point. You advise choosing spiritual fulfillment over material success, right? Thanks, I'll think it over, good night."

"Louisa's a nice girl. Marry her."

Richard licked a paw, rubbed his ear, and then sat in thoughtful silence. At last he spoke. "You traveled twenty years to tell me *that*?"

"She's a sweet kid. The two of you could be very happy."

"That's it?"

"No, there's one thing more. You're so worried about this marketing final, you've talked Carynne Reichmann into giving you some coaching this

weekend. Break the date."

"But if I do that," Richard protested, "I'll flunk. And if I flunk marketing, how do I get to be a national sales manager?"

"Come off it," the older man said, annoyed. "You've had the hots for Carynne all year; this is just an excuse to take one last crack at her before she graduates."

Richard looked chagrined. "Okay, I admit I was dreaming about her. But hey, she's the original Snow Queen. Nothing will happen."

"Dickie boy," the older man said, clucking his tongue, "you forget who you're lying to. I *remember* what you're thinking. And right now, you're thinking that if you were getting somewhere with Carynne you'd toss Louisa out the door in a minute." The older man suddenly grabbed cat/Richard roughly by the neck, held him nose-to-nose, and spoke in low, dark tones. "*So get this straight, pinhead!* This Saturday, Carynne not only coaches you for the exam, but she also invites you into her bed. You'll come dragging your lethargic ass home Sunday at six in the morning to find Louisa already packed."

The cat stopped squirming. "Oh?"

"Of all the things you could possibly do in this universe, I

promise you, you do *not* want to do that."

"Are you out of your mind?" Richard shrieked. "Carynne's beautiful! Brilliant! Everything I ever wanted in a woman!"

"Including selfish? Demanding? Manipulative?"

Richard fastened on an idea. "That's it. You're right about alternate time-lines; I'm the wrong past for you. *My Carynne's nothing like—*"

"Of course she isn't. Now."

Richard paused. "Okay, tell you what. If it turns out you're right, I'll dump her in a few years."

"Idiot!" the older man thundered, "in six months you marry her! In a year she pushes you into going back to school full-time—while holding down a full-time job—to get your MBA. In five years she's into leased BMW's and semiannual vacations in the Virgin Islands, neither of which you can afford; by the time you're thirty your hairline's back *here*," the older man karate-chopped himself on the crown of his head, "your stomach's in real trouble, and Carynne has realized you aren't half as ambitious as she is."

"So? Lots of people survive divorce."

"You, unfortunately, stay married. Always hoping things will improve; and always get-

ting affection from her the same way Muffy gets dog yummys: only when you roll over and beg."

"Muffy?"

The older man dropped the cat on the bed. "Her lhasa apso."

"You mean one of those small, yapping . . . ? Eesh," said Richard, disgusted. He jumped down to the floor, sniffed at his self lying under the bed, then looked up at the older man and cocked his head quizzically. Somehow, no matter how hard he tried, he found it hard to accept such grim portents from a caricature of a salesman. "So it won't work, huh?"

"It can't work," the spectre explained. "You two are incompatible at the most primal level. I mean—look, you've got three avatars now, right? That's 'cause your life path isn't decided yet."

"That inert spud under the bed—that's *me*. Or rather what Carynne will make me out of. And that one up there," he gestured at the Richard floating near the ceiling, "I don't know what future he represents."

"But right now, your primary manifestation is as a cat. That's your favorite avatar; the tom-cat."

"She can't stand cats unless they're neutered, declawed, and kept in the house. Even then she prefers docile, obedient, nearly asexual dogs. You're a

cat person. She's a dog person. It's that basic."

Richard began pacing back and forth between the bed and the radiator, twitching his tail anxiously. "Look, there's got to be something redeeming about the marriage. Kids?" he suggested, hopefully.

"Two daughters who are carbon copies of their mother. They're into horses. You have any idea how much a ten-year-old who wants a horse can whine?"

"Friends, then?"

"Hers. Frank and Gordy are too plebeian for her tastes and you won't see them again after '77."

Richard looked up, into the older man's face. There was tremendous bitterness and inner-directed anger there, eating away at the man like a cancer. And yet, there was something else. A soft—wistfulness? Ignoring the cat for the moment, the older man had turned and was watching Louisa sleep. Hesitantly, tenderly, he reached out a ghost hand and touched her leg. She didn't stir. Quickly, as if she were a delicate treasure he feared his rude touch would ruin, he pulled his hand away and turned around, to find the cat looking straight into his eyes.

"Anyway, that's what I came here to tell you," the older man

said softly. "It's your decision now." He turned to look at Louisa again. "I'll be snapping back to my own time in a minute or two."

That, at last, was what touched cat/Richard. For all the bluster, it was the brief, unguarded slice of tenderness that convinced Richard the older man was telling the truth. Unable to think of anything more comforting, he rubbed up against the man's legs. Older Richard noticed, reached down to scratch him behind the ears, and whispered, "Take good care of her, okay?" Before cat/Richard could answer, older Richard suddenly sat up straight, blanched white with pain, and clamped his fists to the sides of his head.

"What's wrong?" the cat mewed. "Can I help?"

"Weird!" gasped the older man. "Like—*hot maggots* in my brain! Snapback never felt like this be . . ." In that instant, both of them became aware of another presence in the room.

"I thought I'd find you here."

"Carynne!" older Richard shouted. Cat/Richard spun around to find a thin, deeply wrinkled, ascetic old woman wearing an elegant white dress and sitting stiffly erect in a Louis Quatorze armchair (which she had apparently brought with her), holding a lhasa apso in her lap. "And your little dog, too!"

At that moment the dog spotted cat/Richard and, with a pugnacious yap, jumped out of the woman's arms.

"Muffy the fourth!" she commanded. "Heel!"

Instinctively, cat/Richard leapt up onto the bed, turned to face the dog, and let out his most vile and guttural hiss. The dog stopped short, considered the *very* sharp claws Richard had extended, and dutifully trotted back to Carynne. "I'm sorry," she said, addressing the cat. "Muffy's so excitable." She lifted the dog into her lap, then turned to older Richard. "Now, if you're done lying to this young man . . ."

"You can't be here!" older Richard gasped.

"Don't look so surprised, dear," the woman said. "If you can learn projection, I can."

"But—time transference only works between the same mind!"

"Dickie," she admonished, "as usual you're too stubborn to admit you're wrong. I *am* here; therefore I *can* be." She glanced at cat/Richard. "I only hope I'm in time."

"In time for what?" cat/Richard asked, suspiciously.

"I don't know what he's told you so far," Carynne explained, smiling, "but Dickie was going through a premature mid-life crisis when he started this projection business. Seems he had

a habit of picking up teenage bimbos on his sales trips, and when his weight hit two fifty they started laughing in his face. Gave his poor little male ego a terrible shock."

Cat/Richard turned sharply on older Richard, forming the question.

"She isn't *my* Carynne," older Richard protested.

"I certainly am!" she countered.

"But you're so—"

"*Old?*" she completed. "Did you think you had a monopoly on projecting into your past? All this—" she pointed a long, polished fingernail at older Richard, "including *your* present, is *my* past!"

"How did you—"

"You hid your notes well, Dickie. I didn't find out about this projection nonsense until I went through your papers after you died."

"Died!" cat/Richard yowled.

"Don't listen to her," the older man said quickly. "She's trying to get you rattled."

"And so I've come back to provide some balance," Carynne continued, addressing the cat. "Not that it really matters what he tells you. He can't possibly succeed—causality paradox, you know—I'm just disappointed that he spent years trying."

"Kid?" the older man prompted, panic rising in his

voice. Cat/Richard found himself wishing Carynne had flown in, cackling, on a broomstick; it would've made things so much easier. Instead, the glimpse of his own mortality had triggered a surge of guilt, and he was busy remembering just how convincingly he could lie to himself when he wanted something. "Listen, she's . . ." older Richard started, then paused when he saw the way the cat was glaring, first at him, then at Carynne.

"He's trying to decide who to believe," Carynne observed.

Older Richard turned on her. "You'll ruin *everything!*" he hissed. "You weren't satisfied with making *my* life miserable; you're trying to screw up all my *possible* lives." Closing his eyes, he sat up rigidly and grimaced with fierce concentration. "I won't let you do it," he whispered. "I'll force you out."

"Really, Dickie dear," Carynne said, shaking her head slowly, "I should think by now you'd know better than to try a contest of wills with me."

"I am restructuring the projection . . ." he muttered.

"And I'm still here," she said nonchalantly. "At the risk of reminding you of our sex life: are you finished?"

With a gasp, older Richard broke concentration and staggered to his feet, defiantly fac-

ing Carynne. "You think you've won, don't you?" he snarled. "I'll be back!"

"No, you won't," Carynne stated flatly.

"Stop me!"

Carynne shrugged. "If you insist. Dickie dear, do you understand how dreamstate time is purely subjective? I can control my projections far better than you ever could." She rapped her knuckles on the arm of the chair for emphasis. "In a month of real time I can haunt you for the rest of your sad little life, if you force it on me."

"No!" shouted cat/Richard. "Don't give in, Dickie!" He urgently tried to pull his selves together and focus all his awareness through the cat. "We can beat her! If we unite—"

"Goodbye, Dickie," Carynne smiled. A silvery umbilicus snaked down from somewhere and started entwining older Richard. Cat/Richard leapt at it, claws flailing, but the cord was unyielding as cold marble. It fell about older Richard in heavy loops; he struggled briefly, but when the end dropped down and the whole mass began constricting, he gave up.

"Dickie?" the cat screamed.

"I'm sorry," came a muffled voice from inside the coils. "I can't hold off snapback any longer." In the space of a few seconds, the coils tightened to

a mass the size of a fist and then abruptly vanished, leaving a momentary pucker in the air.

On the night of June 27th, 1995, Richard Luck woke up at two A.M. with a start so sudden it disturbed his wife, Carynne.

"What's the matter, Dickie?" she asked.

"Oh . . . just had a *weird* dream."

"That's all right," she mumbled. Pulling him close, she gave him a peck on the cheek, then rolled over and turned her back to him. "Go back to sleep, dear. And no more dreaming about Louisa."

He was awake for hours, wondering.

"My, that was easy," Carynne said smugly. "Now, as for *you*," she took a step towards cat/Richard, who crouched low, raised his hackles, and bared his teeth. "Oh, very well. Go ahead and have your little tantrum; you won't escape me, dear." She lifted the lhasa apso into her arms and began spinning the same glossy cord about herself, slipping into the coils with practiced ease. "See you Saturday!" she called out gaily.

Cat/Richard frantically nudged at his sleeping self, trying to wake up. He had a feeling it was critically urgent that he wake up; he desperately needed to tell the whole story

to his rational daytime self, which was still asleep. If he could just remember every detail; if he could just see Carynne with his waking eyes before she vanished—

As she spun the last loops about herself, Carynne cocked her head at Louisa's sleeping form. "Dickie dear, you always had such cheap taste in women. Whatever do you see in *her*?"

Cat/Richard was getting through. Slowly, his sleeping self was beginning to rouse. Slowly, *very* slowly, his daytime mind was grinding into gear. And then—

Carynne vanished. Richard sat up straight in bed. The disturbance woke Louisa. She rolled over, brushed a few strands of her long brown hair out of her face, and mumbled, "Whasmatter, honey? How come you're awake?"

"Damn cat was licking my face."

"Don't *have* a cat," Louisa noted.

"Then we'll get one. I want a cat."

"Silly boy," Louisa murmured. Richard realized that, as was often the case when he woke up in the middle of the night, he needed to go to the bathroom. He slid out of bed.

"Honey?" Louisa called out as he pulled on the terrycloth

bathrobe they shared. "Come back to bed?"

"In a minute." He had this odd, nagging feeling in the back of his head, like there was something he needed to remember.

"Don't stay up late reading again. You need sleep, too."

"I know." Something *important*, and it was just beyond his grasp.

"Don't want to fall asleep during your marketing exam." He stopped short at the bedroom door. He *remembered*. Turning around, he came back to the bed, and kissed Louisa.

"Lou, sweetheart," he said gently, "I think it's time we talked about getting married."

"Inna morning, honey," she mumbled. Then, as the words soaked in, her eyes snapped wide open. "Did you say married?" she whispered. He nodded. Louisa threw her arms around Richard and hugged so hard his ribs ached. "I thought you'd *never* ask!"

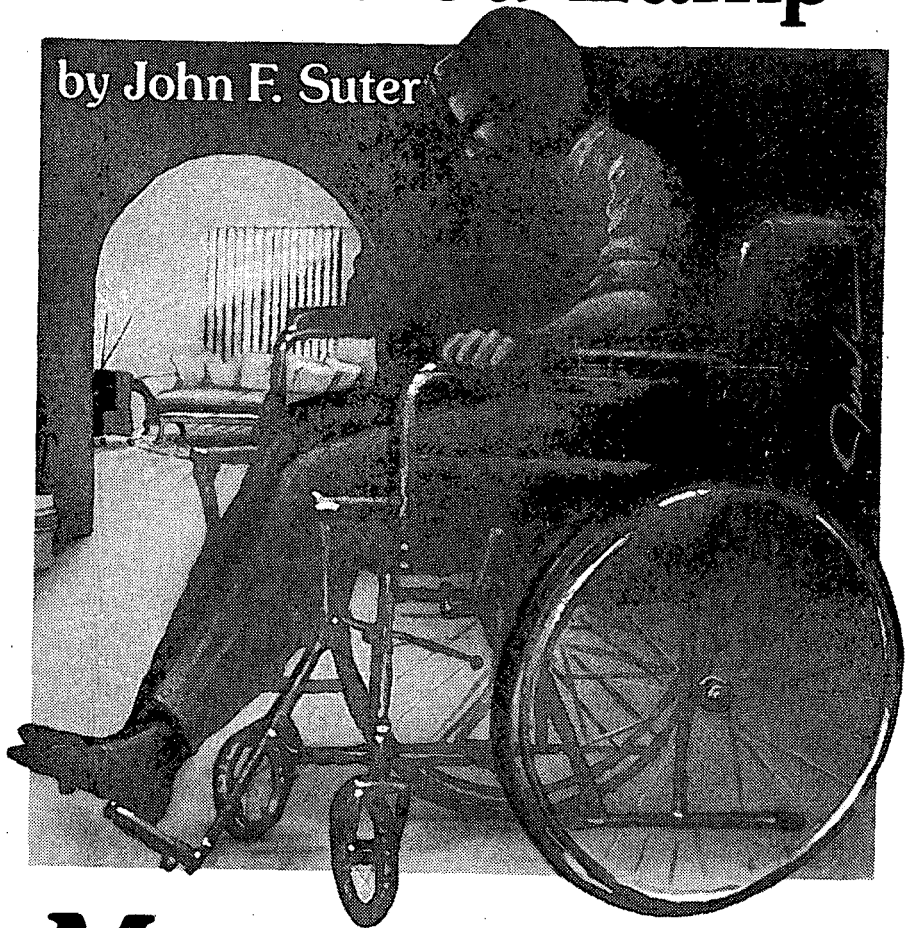
Somewhere down the twisting braided streams of time, a different Richard began chuckling in his sleep again, which woke his wife one more time. It annoyed Carynne no end when it happened, but there was nothing she could do about it.

At that moment.

FICTION

Shattered Lamp

by John F. Suter



Mark Bell stretched his right hand up from the bed toward the crossbar that spanned it. He closed his fingers on the triangular attachment hanging down that was nicknamed "the tra-

peze." With a powerful lift, he pulled himself upright. There was no assist from his legs. They were as dead as last summer's weeds in mid-winter.

He was not thinking of metaphors. With his left hand, he

was working his legs around to the point where he could lower himself into the waiting wheelchair. As he had done on more than two thousand other mornings, he cursed the bullet that had put him in this position.

When he was in the chair and had finally maneuvered his heels onto the footrests, he considered his next move. He decided in favor of the motor. Manual propulsion could follow breakfast this morning.

Bell had often been thankful that he and Elsie had bought this house before the accident. Everything was on one floor, except for the recreation room in the basement. His bedroom, bath, and another bedroom converted into his workroom were at one end, flanked by the garage across the house's front.

He guided the chair to the bathroom and switched on the light. The pastel blue of the tiles was beaten into submission by the stainless rails and grips protruding from every vertical surface.

Every time Bell faced this room, he wished for someone to blame for his condition. Neither of the two possibles had survived, and realism convinced him of the futility of hating the dead.

A bank robber and a cop. He would never know which one.

Eventually, all of the morn-

ing necessities out of the way, he left the bathroom shaved, combed, ready for breakfast. He had decided on scrambled eggs, bacon, and waffles that could be heated in a toaster.

The all-white kitchen adjoined the bathroom. As soon as he wheeled in, he checked the coffeemaker. Cold. Inside, second-hand grounds.

Must be sleeping late, he thought as he disposed of the waste and prepared the machine. He wondered if she was beginning some illness. No sign of it the night before.

He started the eggs and bacon in a big skillet, then wheeled to the refrigerator to get the waffles from the freezer side. The shelves were filled, but even a methodical search revealed no waffles.

Surprised, he rubbed his stubborn chin with long fingers. Someone had been forgetful. Perhaps, he thought as he closed the door, she had put the rest of them into a freezer bag to save space. Better ask her.

He cut back the heat, left the kitchen, and wheeled across the long living room to Elsie's bedroom door. It stood partly ajar.

He tapped lightly with his knuckles and pushed the door open, expecting to see her curly dark hair stirring on the pillow, her small head starting to turn. Instead, he saw a neatly made

bed and an empty room.

"Elsie?" He spoke in a low tone, then louder. "Elsie?" No answer.

He backed, turned, and looked in the other bathroom, then in the guest room at the rear of the house. Both of them were empty.

The stairway to the basement opened near the guest bedroom. Bell opened the door and called loudly down the steps. It was futile.

He closed the door and ran his right hand through his sandy hair. His hazel eyes were narrowed in perplexity.

As he sat there, the clock in the entrance foyer struck eight. Elsie did not usually leave for work before nine forty. If she had only gone to the supermarket, she would not have made her bed yet.

He wheeled back to the kitchen and opened the garage door. The only car inside was his own. But he had not heard the overhead door go up or down.

He reached into the garage and flipped a switch. The overhead door rose with a noise that could not be overlooked.

The drive was empty.

Bell could see a touch of frost on the grass. The October air had a bite in it. He put the overhead door down again and closed the one from the kitchen.

He tried to remember when Elsie had come in the evening before. It was around five fifty, her usual time. She had entered from the garage, so he must have assumed . . .

But her car must have been in the drive. Then, sometime while he slept, she went out of the front door and around the house. The drive had a small slope, as did the street for the length of the block. She had only to release the brake to be virtually out of earshot before starting the motor. He could not have heard.

Why?

Bell rationalized: something had to be done very early. Several hours' extra work. Something had to be finished before the ordinary work day began. She had probably left around daybreak, trying her best not to disturb him.

His eyes softened. She had always been considerate, never more so than in the past six years.

He had never been able to persuade her that she had no guilt for placing him in the situation that had caused his paraplegia.

"Don't I still love you?" he often said. "Don't I appreciate everything you do for me? Do you think I don't know how supportive you are? Where would I be without you?"

Her big, dark eyes would fill with tears at the memory of his quickness and his strength, cut down in one immutable moment. Yet she had never let him sink into despair and self-pity in all the long time of readjustment.

He shrugged. He would know when the time came. Better to get on with the day's routine.

Yet, with ten o'clock barely past, he was in his workroom, staring at a large, unsullied sketchpad. No line had been drawn for the preliminary studies for the next children's book he was to illustrate. The text had charmed him, but now the harmony he needed would not come.

The telephone rang.

"Mark Bell."

"Hello, Mark. This is Karen, Galleon Travel. Is Elsie there?"

"Sorry, Karen, she isn't. She hasn't come in yet?"

"Not unless—no, that's not likely. I came in early myself."

Bell decided to sit on it. "She left here with time to spare. Maybe it's car trouble."

The woman at the other end sighed. "And welcome to the club. Well, it's just that she has a scrap of information about a departure time that I need. I'll get it another way."

"Karen," Bell spoke quickly before she could hang up, "has

Elsie been carrying a bigger load lately?"

"Not that I know."

"I just thought she might be. She's seemed preoccupied at times."

"It's not impossible, but we keep in pretty good touch."

He thanked her and hung up.

Then, in succession, he called the garage where she took her car and the emergency rooms of the two hospitals. No, he was told, her car was not in the shop, nor had it been. Both hospitals said that no woman of her name or description had been brought in.

Neither the city police nor the sheriff's office had any report of an accident involving her car.

He made one more call before noon. Any more would be blowing things out of proportion, he decided. He phoned her sister, Dorothy, a four hour drive away in Ohio.

In answer to his discreet questions, Dorothy, a large, placid woman, told him that she had not seen or heard from her sister in recent weeks. She considered Elsie unlikely to arrive unannounced. Bell hastened to reassure her that the call was unimportant, no more than a need to get some information quickly when nobody could locate Elsie momentarily.

When he finished the call,

Bell stared out of the window, totally unaware of the light gilding the edges of the leaves. He was becoming aware of the lies he had been telling in coverup. Coverup of what? Had anyone, even in this house, been lying to him?

Early in the afternoon, he tried to report her as a missing person, only to be told by the police that he must wait two more days.

"Be honest, mister," said the woman who had taken his call, "you'd feel pretty silly if she came in this evening—wouldn't you?"

"What if she's been kidnapped?"

"Do you have any evidence of that? Any demands?"

"Not a bit," he confessed.

"Then there's nothing we can do. If you still have the problem day after tomorrow, call back."

He gave up, went to the basement on the chairlift, and worked out with his exercise equipment for an hour.

On the following day, Bell considered the first thing he knew anyone would ask: had she left him?

He told himself that this was unlikely. She had not taken her suitcase, and her clothes seemed to be undisturbed. Her brief-

case was missing, but that could have been in the car.

He had never heard rumors of any other man. Certainly, faced with their radically different domestic life of the past six years, she had abundant reason to be tempted.

In recent months they had begun to discuss having a baby. It was not physically impossible, and life had stabilized enough now. Would she have sacrificed something so fulfilling?

The thoughts chased themselves around in his brain through the long day while he waited in vain for the telephone to ring or a door to open.

He resisted turning on the living room television. At the far end of the room, near her bedroom, was a double-length davenport where Elsie liked to lie while she watched her favorite programs. Its emptiness mocked him.

Somehow, he got through a second bad night and into morning.

When he finally thought that someone would listen, Bell made a call to the police. This time, he did not call Missing Persons.

"Yes. My name is Bell. Mark Bell. I'd like to talk to Sergeant Adams."

"Sergeant Adams?" The impersonal voice on the telephone

hesitated. "Would that be Ben Adams?"

"That's right. Don't tell me he's not with you any more."

"No, sir. It's Lieutenant Adams, now. And you want to talk to him?"

"Yes."

"A minute. I'll see if he's available."

A short interval. No Musak. A faint flurry of noise, then a resonant baritone. "Lieutenant Adams. What can I do for you, Mr. Bell?"

"I need some help. Do you remember who I am?"

"Maybe. Fill me in."

"The time Officer Train was killed by a bank robber six years ago—?"

Adams' tone became more personal. "*That* Bell. I thought you might be the one. The last time I saw you, we had a talk when you were in the hospital. How're things?"

"Pretty good, up until two days ago. Then my wife disappeared."

"Oh. Tough. Have you reported this to Missing Persons?"

"I tried, but it was too early. It didn't sound like I'd do much good with them anyway."

Bell envisioned raised eyebrows when he said this.

"Don't sell them short," Adams said. "They know their business. Try again."

"Well, maybe. But, look—you don't owe me, and I don't owe you. Would you give me some time and let me lay it out? Then you decide, and I'll go along with it."

Adams said, "Hmmm," then was silent. He came back on in several seconds. "When can you come in, Mr. Bell?"

"Could you come here? Two reasons. One, you'd get a better picture of things. Two, I'm a paraplegic. I can make it, but it would be a great favor if you came here."

Some discomfort came into Adams' voice. "Sorry, Mr. Bell. I never knew how you came out of that mess. All right. Sit tight, and I'll make it this afternoon. Now—I'll ask you a favor. I'll bring along somebody from Missing Persons. Okay?"

Bell swallowed. "Okay."

"Good. Now, what's your address?"

At a few minutes past two, the front door chime sounded. Bell found two men on his doorstep—Adams, little changed since they had last met, and a tall, young black man.

"Come in," he said.

Adams, a near six-footer with high cheekbones, close-cropped black hair, and a poker face, nodded. "Hello, Mr. Bell. I'd like you to meet Detective Riggs, from Missing Persons."

Riggs topped Adams by an inch. He had a completely round head, was light brown with a thin, straight nose and thin lips. The hand he extended was long; his grip was firm, but not challenging.

Bell showed them into the living room. Adams and Riggs elected to sit at one end of the long davenport. Bell wheeled to face them across the walnut coffee table.

Adams glanced at Riggs, then at Bell.

"Mr. Bell, I want to give Riggs some background on your situation here. I waited until now so that you can correct me when I'm wrong. Okay?"

"Go ahead."

Adams addressed Riggs. "A little over six years ago, somebody decided to knock off First National's mall branch. We don't know how many. Only one, maybe. Possibly three."

Riggs nodded. "I read about it."

"Mr. Bell and the holdup guy came out of back doors of the bank and a shop next to it at the same time. Also by coincidence, a cruiser was just seconds away when the alarm went off, and Officer Train was out of the car, waiting. Mr. Bell had a few steps' lead on the holdup man. He caught on—got confused—turned to go back—and both the thug and Train opened

fire. One of them shot Mr. Bell in the back. With their next shots, they killed each other."

"The thing I remember most," Riggs said, "is that they had no way to prove who messed up Mr. Bell."

"That's right. Both Train and the thug got off only two rounds. Both guns were the same caliber. The slug from Mr. Bell was too distorted to be useful. There was no doubt where the second rounds went. The missing first round was never found."

"What about direction and angle?" Riggs asked.

"Not much value. Mr. Bell was turning to go back. He *could* have been hit by Train—but he couldn't remember which way he turned. Train's partner was busy looking for the wheelman—if there was one—and he didn't see most of it." Adams looked at Bell. "Right?"

"As near as I can tell."

"The two of us got acquainted when he was in the hospital. I was assigned to sort out what had happened. After all, this man here *could* have been in on the heist in some way. I did find out that he was in the mall to deliver prints of some of his pictures to a book shop for a promotion. His wife had a blouse on layaway at a shop next to the bank. When she heard he was going to the mall, she asked

him to pick up the blouse. It checked out. He was off the hook."

"I was," said Bell, "but Elsie put herself on one when she realized how it happened. I've had an uphill fight getting her off it. I was going to the mall anyway. She didn't send me there."

Adams and Riggs exchanged glances.

"She's had enough on her hands, helping me to come back as far as I have," Bell went on. "I never knew how strong she was, physically and psychologically, until I had to turn my life around. The things she helped me with—the everyday things you take for granted—"

His voice trailed off.

Then he rocked them.

"I gave two reasons for wanting you here. There's a third. I haven't killed her."

He could see them searching for words.

Adams cleared his throat. "Why should we suppose you had?"

"When a man's wife 'goes away' and isn't seen again, isn't he suspected of killing her? Isn't it often the truth?"

Adams' poker face was back in place. "It's happened."

"Not this time," said Bell. "I'd like the two of you to go through this house and walk over my lot and satisfy yourselves that she's not hidden or buried here."

Adams rubbed a big hand along the arm of the davenport. "We'll take you up on that. First, you tell us what's happened, the way you see it."

Bell leaned forward to relive his agony. Before he started, Riggs took out a pocket recorder, laid it on the coffee table, and started it.

When Bell finished, Riggs spoke up.

"Does anyone know yet that your wife has disappeared?"

"Not to my knowledge. I told Karen at Galleon that she had gone to Ohio on a family emergency. Elsie's sister, Dot, thinks that Galleon sent her to Chicago on a rush job to negotiate a hot package deal. Would it help if the truth were let out?"

Riggs flipped his right hand. "Hard to say."

He looked directly at Bell. "However, when the lieutenant gave me the preliminaries, I called your neighbor, Mrs. Disch, across the street, and asked her when she'd seen your wife last. She saw her come home and park on the drive three nights ago. Next morning, the car was gone, just like you said. I told Mrs. Disch that you had misunderstood the date when your wife was to go away on business, and you were further confused when she hadn't called you. I think she was satisfied."

Adams cut in, his baritone voice neutral.

"Mr. Bell, when you were in the hospital six years ago, Dr. Lenhardt was your doctor, wasn't he?"

"I had several, depending on what was needed."

"I understand. Who is your family doctor?"

"Laird is my doctor. Elsie goes to Carroll."

"Then, if she should go to a hospital, she'd ask for Carroll?"

Puzzled, Bell said, "Yes, but they'd probably call me first and have me arrange it."

"Not necessarily," Adams replied. "Might I use your phone?"

Bell pointed. "Take it in my workroom. First door on your right, past the kitchen."

Adams got up and left. Riggs glanced down.

"Attractive rug, Mr. Bell. Don't often see short pile in a lot of homes."

Bell slapped the arm of his wheelchair. "This rolls easier on it."

"Nice place you've got here."

Bell laughed. "You should see the mortgage. If both of us weren't pulling in decent money, we'd not be here."

Riggs' eyebrows rose. "You didn't get a settlement?"

Bell shrugged. "From Drew, the thug at the heist? No way. Why should the city, when it couldn't be proved who did it? They did contribute medical

costs for the first year, after insurance. They felt some obligation because Train should have waited to open fire."

"About your wife, Mr. Bell, I should warn you that it will be assumed that she just decided to leave you."

"I realize that," Bell conceded, "but I refuse to believe it. When two people love each other, it just doesn't happen."

Riggs sighed. "I'm only two years into this, sir, but I could tell you stories you'd find hard to believe."

A door opened while he was talking, and Adams came back.

"Stories you wouldn't believe?" he said. He sat down. "Any story you've got, I've got ten to top it. Anyway, I got through to Dr. Carroll. Lucky he's my doctor, too, or he might not have talked to me. To his knowledge, she's not in any hospital in the area. That includes Shadowlawn."

Riggs' eyebrows went up again. "I might not have thought of that one right away. It could have been a breakdown."

"Not in any to *his* knowledge," Bell said.

"Well, yes. But something more," Adams went on, leaning forward. "She doesn't have cancer or any other horror."

"Doesn't have—?" Bell snorted. "Well, of course not! She'd have told me."

"Don't be so sure," Adams

said. "Some people would do just what she might have done. When they find out, they run. Why? To spare their partner agony? To hope to outrun it? Who knows?"

"I appreciate your thinking of this, don't get me wrong," Bell said. He spread his hands. "Look, here's our situation. I'm over the worst of my problems and am living with the way things are. I have all the contracts I can handle, and I sell my other paintings for good money. Elsie's freer than she has been for years, and she's the backbone of that travel agency. And we hope to have things even better."

He paused. "We'll be having a baby in the next year or two, I'd not be surprised."

He saw their incredulity.

"Do you mean—" Riggs fumbled.

Bell smiled. "Sex? Oh, yes, it's possible. Not easy, but possible."

"Mr. Bell," Adams said in a soft voice, "you have more spirit than anyone I've met in a long, long time."

"Thank you. Now—how about proving that I haven't killed my wife?"

"All right," said Adams, getting to his feet. "Tell me the layout, and Steve and I will check it out."

Bell gave directions. When he had finished, Riggs said,

"One question. She took no suitcase. Any makeup, stuff like that, missing?"

Bell shrugged. "She had three of everything. Who knows?"

Adam and Riggs went slowly and carefully through Bell's end of the house, getting a rapid education in how he had to live.

Riggs eyed the bathroom. "The poor sonofabitch. Wouldn't you hate to put up with this?"

Adams was testing the sturdiness of a section of railing. "Wouldn't you hate to be the one to have to supply what he doesn't have?"

In the workroom, Riggs carefully looked through a rack of paintings and a folio of charcoal illustrations. "This guy is good."

"If you say so. I could live with any of it, I'll say that."

No comments on his bedroom. Kitchen and dinette admired for cleanliness and order. Nothing out of the ordinary anywhere.

The garage. Riggs: "She took her own car, so that must be his. How can he cope with it?" Adams: "Hand controls, special modifications. You ought to look around more. You'd flip if you saw how some of these people make out. Load their wheelchairs, cruise around just like you and me."

Dining room across the front of the house, living room behind it. Nothing obvious either place. Riggs: "One or both of

'em has a good eye." Adams:
"Or paid for good advice."

Guest room. A blank. Wife's bath. Neat, but crowded with accessories. Adams: "Like the man said, three of everything."

Elsie's bedroom. Riggs eyed a long bookshelf running above the head of the bed. "Lot of poetry here. This I can relate to."

Adams, stooping, was peering under the bed. "It takes all kinds. I'll come by in ten years and see if you still say that."

"I'm wondering if she had any diaries."

Adams straightened. He had not even found dust. "How'll we know? Our man says she took a briefcase."

"We'll know if we find any."

Riggs leaned over, glancing along the books. "Frost, Sandburg, Masters, Housman, Dickinson, Shakespeare's sonnets, Tennyson, Keats, Shelley—"

"Quite a collection. What's it tell you?"

"A good mind. I haven't covered 'em all. I suspect there'll be some good moderns here."

"No sugar and spice? No heavy perfume stuff?"

Riggs shook his head. "A piece of paper sticking up from the Shelley—" He leaned over and slid the book from the shelf. Opening the volume, he glanced idly at the pages and the poem spanning two of them, "When the Lamp Is Shattered." He read the paper.

"Anything?"

He passed it to Adams. "To her, maybe."

It was a sheet from a blue memo pad. Adams read, from a clear, flowing hand:

"One times two

Is true

Two plus one—

One's undone.'

"What would you call it?" he asked Riggs.

"New math," Riggs answered, laughing.

Adams pocketed it, thinking. "Put the book back. Let's get down to the basement."

Ten minutes later, they came upstairs again. Bell sat where he had been, waiting.

"You can give yourself quite a workout down there," said Adams. "I'm impressed. Maybe I'll drop in now and then."

"I'll be happy to share," Bell said. "You might have to wait your turn."

"Nothing new." Adams turned to Riggs. "Steve, why don't you walk around the place? Call me if you find anything." He eyed Bell. "Especially if anything's been sodded."

When Riggs had left, Adams, seated again on the davenport, said, "I doubt he'll find anything. I think you told it straight. However, there's something you might consider."

Bell's pulse began to increase.

"All right."

"It's not going to be easy. Suppose we take a look again at what happened six years ago. That hood, Drew, decides to pull that bank heist. Was he alone, or were one—two—more in it with him? If he was alone, he had to make his grab, get out to his car, and be long gone before we could get moving.

"After it all went down, we did find a two-door Pontiac that had made the stolen vehicles list that morning. It could have been left by Drew or by his wheelman, who thought the scene was too hot for him to be moving at all.

"Complication. Points to another accomplice. Drew came out carrying a shopping bag, supposed to be full of x amount of money. Bank never did release a figure publicly, but told us about thirteen thousand. Trouble is, the shopping bag was empty. How come?

"Possible answer—Drew had an accomplice on the scene. Accomplice has identical shopping bag. In the confusion, they switch. Are you with me?"

"No problem."

Adams smiled without humor. "Don't worry. I don't read you as the accomplice.

"Here's where it gets painful. Were you and your wife getting along when you were shot? An honest answer."

Bell's temples pounded. The pain was almost intolerable.

"Why, yes . . . We've never had any differences . . ."

Adams sighed. "Well, maybe not. Now—you're going to want to kill me, but control yourself—suppose your wife set you up."

He almost screamed back. "Set me up? Why?"

"She's the only one who can answer, if you can't. She wanted you out of the way. Who knows? She's the one who switched bags. She had the money all this time. Now the third man has turned up and wants his cut. Maybe he's been doing time and just got out. She takes off to give him his split. How about it?"

"Not a word of truth! I know her too well—"

Adams pushed it. "Maybe you're wondering about her part of the money. She's had six years. She could slip in a little bit here and there, and you'd never notice. She makes good money, and that would be a good coverup."

Bell strained in his chair. "If any of that is true, why did she stay with me? Why did she help me fight my way back?"

"Maybe she knew that, if you got to thinking, you'd put things together. Maybe she was sorry for what happened. Maybe it gave her good cover. Who knows?"

Bell wheeled his chair close to Adams' feet. His hand hov-

ered near the motor's controls. The policeman sat without moving, not watching what Bell might do.

"Think, Mr. Bell," Adams said. "As I remember, she wasn't local. You told me you'd met her on a vacation in Ohio and married her in two weeks. How much did you really know about her?"

"Enough. Her family were good, middle-class—"

"That can go either way. Be fair. Think about it. Missing Persons will give you a break, anyway. They'll be on your side. Just realize that there might be surprises."

Bell lifted his hand and laid it on the arm of the chair.

The door opened, and Riggs came back inside.

"Not a thing. You seem to be clean, Mr. Bell."

"Thanks," Bell growled.

Riggs looked at Adams. "What happened to sweetness and light?"

"Out to lunch," Adams answered.

Riggs turned to Bell. "I'll need a description of the car and the license number. It would help if I could have a picture of her."

"We have some pictures that were just made for the church directory. I'll get you a wallet-sized one. The car—"

When they had finished, a still-shaken Bell showed Ad-

ams and Riggs out. He had expected hope and reassurance. He was left with doubt and depression. How could police live with never-ending suspicion and cynicism?

Adams was driving. Riggs studied him thoughtfully.

"What did you do in there while I was outside?"

"Gave him some pain reliever."

"Come again?"

Adams gave him a side glance. "Something for you to remember, even though you won't want to. A lot of people—a lot of people—will pull out and leave somebody who needs them. From abandoning a baby to ones like we just left. They just get to the point where they can't take it any more."

"Even if they love the one they've left?"

Adams shrugged. "Makes you wonder, huh?"

Riggs pulled out the paper he had found in the Shelley collection. Adams had returned it to him. "The poem next to this was 'When the Lamp Is Shattered.' It starts:

*When the lamp is shattered
The light in the dust lies
dead—'*

That makes some sense. But, if she wrote this paper herself, what did she mean?"

Adams grinned. "It's what's behind this."

"Huh?"

"You're the poetry expert. And I figured it out."

Riggs studied the verse. Irritated, he muttered, "So, give."

"The last line. 'One's undone.' Read that, 'I'm undone.'"

"How?"

"Two plus one."

"Three?"

"Yeah. She's pregnant."

"He didn't say anything about that."

"He doesn't know," Adams pointed out. "But she is pregnant. Carroll was so glad to let me know she doesn't have cancer that he let slip what she really has."

"Bell seems to think they both wanted that."

"Yeah, but it takes two. Suppose you put in nearly six years raising an adult-sized baby—a pretty self-reliant baby, but not completely independent. Then suppose you forget and let down your guard a time or two, and you find yourself with two infants in your future. And you're not psychologically up to it. What do you do?"

Riggs considered. "Face up to it. Or go for an abortion."

"Just what I'm sure she did—go for the abortion. She probably went somewhere in Ohio. She might come back, but don't bet on it."

Riggs reflected on this. "And what you gave him to think on is so tough that the truth won't cross his mind?"

Adams grinned again. "Until he starts to see the holes in it."

"Holes?"

"Beginning with the fact that the police cruiser showed up only by happenstance."

"What choices will he have?" Riggs challenged.

"My story makes her an adversary," Adams said. "The truth might be that she has just discovered her breaking point."

Riggs spoke softly, quoting:

"Naked to laughter

When leaves fall and cold winds come.'"

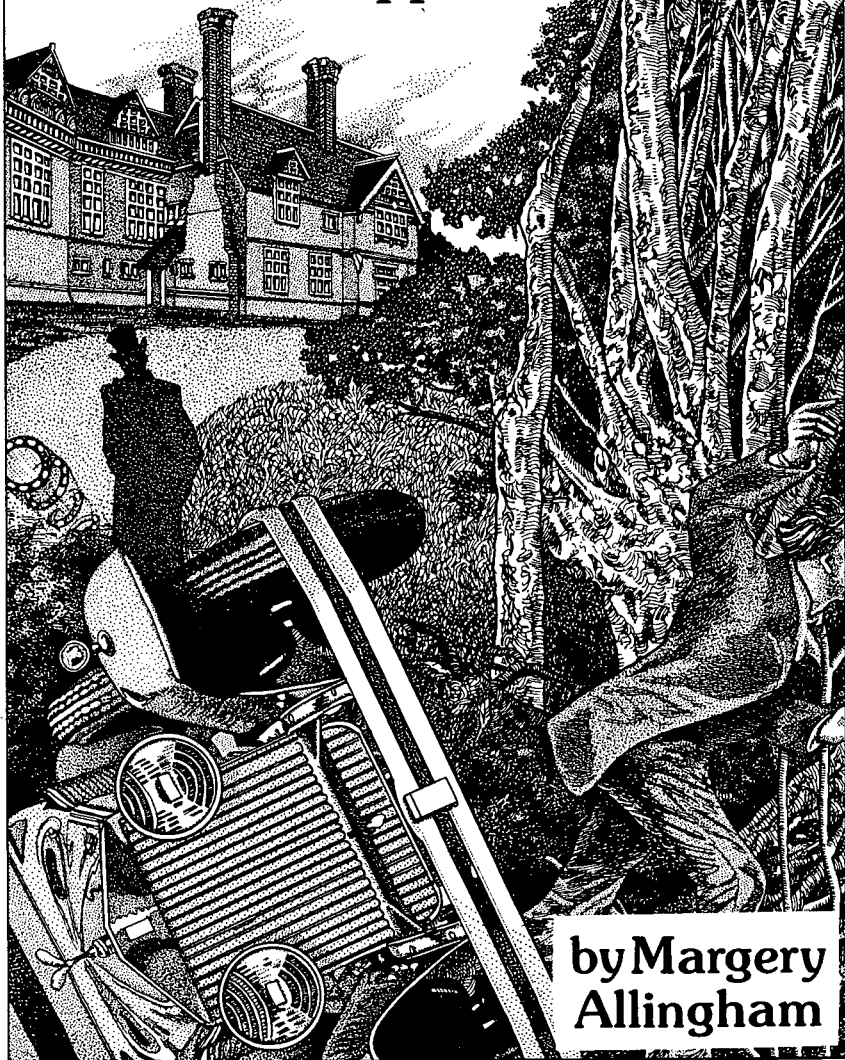
"What's that?"

"The last lines of Shelley's poem."

"How did he know?"

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Name on the Wrapper



by Margery
Allingham

Mr. Albert Campion was one of those useful if at times exasperating people who remain interested in the world in general at three o'clock on a chilly winter's morning. When he saw the overturned car, dark and unattended by the grass verge, therefore, he pulled up his own saloon and climbed out on to the road, whose frosty surface was glistening like a thousand diamonds.

His lean figure wrapped in a dark overcoat was rendered slightly top-heavy by the fact that he wore over it a small traveling rug arranged as a cape. This sartorial anachronism was not of his own devising. His dinner hostess, old Mrs. Laverock, was notorious both for her strong will and her fear of throat infections, and when Mr. Campion had at last detached himself from her husband's brandy and reminiscences she had appeared at the top of the Jacobean staircase, swaddled in pink velvet, with the rug in her arms.

"Either that young man wears this round his throat or he does not leave this house."

The edict went forth with more authority than ever her husband had been able to dispense from the bench, and Mr. Campion had gone out into the night for a fifty-mile run back to Piccadilly wearing the rug, with his silk hat perched precariously above it.

Now its folds, which reached his nose, prevented him from seeing that part of the ground which lay directly at his feet, so that he kicked the ring and sent it wheeling down the moonlit road before he saw it. The colored flash in the pale light caught his attention and he went after it. It lay in his hand a few minutes later, as unattractive a piece of jewellery as ever he had been called upon to consider. It was a circle of different-colored stones mounted on heavy gold, and was certainly unusual, if not particularly beautiful or valuable. He thrust it absently into his coat pocket before he resumed his investigation of the abandoned car.

He had just decided that the departed driver had been either drunk or certifiably insane in the moment of disaster when the swift crackle of bicycle wheels on the frost behind him made him swing round, and he found himself confronted by another caped figure who came to a wobbling and suspicious halt at his elbow.

"Now, now, there's no use you putting up a fight. I ain't alone, and if I were I'm more'n a match for you."

The effect of these two thundering lies, uttered in a pleasant country voice rendered unnaturally high by what was, no doubt, excusable nervousness, delighted Mr. Campion, but unfortunately

the folds of his hostess's rug hid his disarming smile and the country policeman stood gripping his bicycle as if it were a weapon.

"You're caught!" he said, his East Anglian accent bringing the final word out in a roar of triumph not altogether justified. "Take off your mask."

"My what?" Mr. Campion's startled question was muffled by his drapery, and he pulled it down to let his chin out.

"That's right," said the constable with a return of confidence, as his prisoner appeared so tractable. "Now, what have you been a-doing of? Answer up. It'll be best for you."

"My good oaf—" Mr. Campion's tone was forgiving—"you're making an ass of yourself, and I should hold that bicycle still if I were you or you'll get the back wheel between your legs and fall over it."

"Now then, no names, no names, if you please, sir." The Law was showing signs of disquiet again, but the bicycle was straightened hastily. "You'll have to come down to see the inspector."

Mr. Campion's astonishment began to grow visible and convincing, for, after all, the country bobby is not as a rule a night bird of prey.

"Look here," he said patiently, "this pathetic-looking mess here isn't *my* car."

"No, I know that's not." The triumphant note crept into the constable's voice again. "I seen the number as soon as I come up."

"Since you've observed so much," continued Mr. Campion politely, "would it be tactless to inquire if you've noticed that?"

He swung round as he spoke and pointed to his own car, standing like a silver ghost a few yards down the road.

"Eh?" The Law was evidently taken by surprise. "Oh, you ran into him, did you? Where is he?"

Campion sighed and embarked on the slow process of convincing his captor that the car ahead belonged to him, his licenses were in order, and that he was properly and expensively insured. He also gave his own name and address, Colonel Laverock's name and address, and the time at which he had left the house. By way of full measure he also delivered a short lecture on "Cars and How to Overturn Them," with special reference to the one on the verge, and was finally conducted to his own vehicle and grudgingly permitted to depart.

"I don't really know as how you oughtn't to have come along to find the inspector," said the constable finally as he leaned on the

low near-side door. "You didn't ought to have been masked. I'll have to report it. That rug might have been to protect your throat, but then that might not."

"That cape of yours may be buttoned up against the cold or it may be worn simply to disguise the fact that your tunic is loosened at the throat," retorted Mr. Campion, and, letting in the clutch, he drove away, leaving a startled countryman with the conviction that he had actually encountered a man with X-ray eyes at last.

On the by-pass Mr. Campion ran into a police cordon, and once again was subjected to a searching inquiry concerning his licenses. Having been, in his opinion, held up quite long enough while the police fooled about looking for stolen cars, he said nothing about the overturned one but drove peacefully home to his flat in Bottle Street and went to bed. His ridiculous encounter with the excitable constable had driven all recollection of the ring from his head and he thought no more about it until it appeared on his breakfast table the following morning.

His man had discovered it in the coat pocket and, deducing the conventional worst, had set it out with an air of commiseration not altogether tactful; anxious, no doubt, that his employer should remember first thing in the morning any lady who might have refused him on the night before.

Campion put aside the *Times* with regret and took up the ring. By morning light it was even less beautiful than it had appeared under the moon. It was a woman's size and was heavy in the baroque fashion that has returned after fifty or sixty years. Some of the stones, which ran all the way round the hoop, were very good and some were not; and as he sat looking at it his eyebrows rose. He was still admiring it as a curio rather than a work of art when his old friend Superintendent Stanislaus Oates rang up from Scotland Yard. He sounded heavily amused.

"So you've been running round the country in disguise, have you?" he said cheerfully. "Like to come in for a chat this morning?"

"Not particularly. What for?"

"I want an explanation for a telephoned report which has come in this morning. We've been called in by the Colnewych police on a very interesting little case. I'm going over the stuff now. I'll expect you in half an hour."

"All right." Mr. Campion did not sound enthusiastic. "Shall I wear my mask?"

"Come with your head in a bag, if you like," invited the superintendent vulgarly. "Keep your throat wrapped up. There's nothing like an old sock, they say. Place the toe upon the windpipe and . . ."

Mr. Campion rang off.

Half an hour later, however, he presented himself at the superintendent's office and sat, affable and exquisite, in the visitor's chair. Oates dismissed his secretary and leaned over the desk. His grey face, which was usually so lugubrious, had brightened considerably as Campion appeared and now he had some difficulty in hiding a grin of satisfaction.

"Driving round the country with a topper over your eyes and a blanket round your neck at three o'clock in the morning," he said. "You *must* have been lit. Still, I won't go into that. I'll be magnanimous. What do you know about this business?"

"I'm innocent," announced his visitor flatly. "Whatever it is, I haven't done it. I went to dinner with a wealthy and childless godparent. I mention this in case your mercenary soul may not be able to believe that any sober man will motor fifty miles into the wilds of East Anglia for a meal. When I left, my godparent's wife, who once had tonsillitis as a child and has never forgotten it, lent me a small rug. (It is sixty inches by sixty inches and is of a rather lurid tartan which I am not entitled to wear.) As she will tell you, if you ask her, she safety-pinned this firmly to the back of my neck. On my way home I passed a very interestingly overturned car, and while I was looking at it a large red-faced ape dressed up as a policeman attempted to arrest me. That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

"Then you don't know anything about the crime?" The superintendent was disappointed but unabashed. "I'll tell you. You never know, you might be useful."

"It has happened," murmured Mr. Campion.

"It's a case of robbery," went on Oates, ignoring the interruption. "A real big haul. The assessors are on to it now but, roughly speaking, it's in the neighborhood of twenty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery and little boxes."

"Little boxes?"

"Snuff boxes and patch boxes, enamel things covered with diamonds and what-not." Oates sounded contemptuous and Campion laughed.

"People of ostentatious tastes?" he ventured.

"No, it's a collection of antiques," said Oates seriously, and looked up to find Campion grinning. "You're a bit lah-di-blinking-dah today, aren't you?" he protested. "What is it? The effects of your night on the tiles? Look here, you pay attention, my lad. You were found nosing round the wreckage of a car thought to have been driven by thief or thieves, and the very least you can do is to try and make yourself useful. Last night there was a bit of a do at St. Bede's Priory, about five miles away from your godpapa's place. It was a largish show, and the place, which seems to be about as big as the British Museum and rather like it, was full to bursting."

Campion stared at him.

"You're talking about the Hunt Ball at old Allenbrough's private house, I take it?" he put it mildly.

"Then you do know about it?"

"I don't know about the robbery. I know about the ball. It's an annual affair. Old Porky Allenbrough's ball is almost an institution, like the Lord Mayor's Show—it's very like that in general effect, too, now I come to think of it. I used to attend regularly when I was young."

Oates sniffed.

"Well, anyway, there seem to have been close on five hundred people gathered together there," he said. "They were all over the house and grounds, cars going and coming all the time. A real party, the local super says it was. All we know is that about two o'clock, just when the crowd was thinning a bit, her ladyship goes up to her room and finds her jewellery gone and her famous collection of antiques pinched out of the glass-fronted cupboard in the boudoir next door to her bedroom.

"All the servants were downstairs watching the fun, of course, and hadn't seen a thing. The local police decided it must have been a professional job and they flung a cordon round the whole district. They figured that a crook had taken advantage of the general excitement to burgle the place in the ordinary way. They were very smart on the job, but they didn't lay hands on a single 'pro.' In fact, the only suspicious character who showed up during the whole of the evening was a lad in a top hat with a plaid blanket—"

"What about that overturned car?" interrupted his visitor.

"I'm coming to that," said Oates severely. "Wait a minute. That car belonged to a very respectable couple who went to the dance and stayed at it. They were just going to leave when the alarm was given and it was then they discovered the car had been stolen. The

gardeners who were acting as car-park attendants didn't remember it going, but then, as they said, cars were moving in and out all the evening. People would drive 'em off a little way to sit out in. It was a real old muddle by the sound of it. The super told me on the phone that in his opinion every manservant on the place was as tight as a lord the whole evening."

"And every lord as tight as a drum, no doubt," added Mr. Campion cheerfully. "Very likely. It sounds like the good old days before the Conferences. I see. Well, the suggestion is that the car was pinched by the burglar, who used it to escape in. What did he arrive in? A howdah?"

Oates sat back and scratched his chin.

"Yes," he said. "That's the trouble. The police are in a bit of a difficulty. You see, her ladyship is howling for the return of her valuables, but neither she nor her husband will admit for an instant that one of their guests might be the culprit. That was the awkward thing at the time. A watch was kept on those guests who left after the discovery of the theft, but no one was searched, of course."

Mr. Campion was silent for a moment.

"These shows are done in parties," he remarked at last. "People take a party to a ball like that. Porky and his missis would invite a hundred friends or so and ask them each to bring a party. It's a private affair, you see, not an ordinary Hunt Ball. Allenbrough calls it the Whippersfield Hunt Ball because he likes to see a pink coat or two about. He's M.F.H. and can do what he likes, and it's a wealthy hunt, anyway. Yes, I see the trouble. I don't envy the local super if he has to go round to all old Allenbrough's pals and say: 'Excuse me, but did you include a professional jewel thief in the party you took to the ball at St. Bede's on the twenty-third last?'"

"I know. That's what it amounts to." Oates was gloomy. "Got any ideas? You're our Society expert."

"Am I? Well, in that capacity let me advise you that such a course would provoke endless correspondence both to the Chief Constable and the heavier daily Press. You're sure this was a professional job?"

"Yes. The jewellery was in a wall safe which had been very neatly cracked and the show cupboard had been opened by an expert. Also there were no fingerprints."

"No trademarks, either, I expect?"

"No, it was a simple job for a 'pro.' It didn't call for anything

sensational. It was simply far too neat for an amateur, that's all. We're rounding up all the likelies, of course, but with such a field to choose from, the right man may easily slip the stuff before we can get round to him."

Mr. Campion rose.

"You have all my sympathy. It's not what you yourself would call a picnic, is it? Still, I'll ferret round a bit and let you have any great thoughts that may come to me. By the way, what do you think of that?"

He crossed the room as he spoke and laid the many-stoned ring on the desk.

"Not very much," said Oates, turning it over with a dubious forefinger. "Where did you get it?"

"I picked it up in the street," said Mr. Campion truthfully. "I ought to take it to a police station, but I don't think I will. I'd rather like to give it back to the owner myself."

"Do what you like with it, my lad." Oates was mildly exasperated. "Keep your mind on the important jewellery, because now Scotland Yard has taken over the case it means the Metropolitan area pays for the inquiry; don't forget that."

Campion was still looking at the ring.

"Anyway, I showed it to you," he said, and wandered towards the door.

"Don't waste your time over trifles," Oates called after him. "You can have that ring. If anybody asks you, say I said you could."

It would have appeared that Mr. Campion took the superintendent's final offer seriously, for he replaced the trinket carefully in his waistcoat pocket before turning into the nearest telephone booth, where he rang up that unfailing source of Society gossip, old Lady Laradine. After listening to her for a full two minutes, while she asked after every relative he had in the world, he put the question he had in mind.

"Who is Gina Gray? I've heard the name, but I can't place her. Gray. Gray with an A."

"My dear boy! So pretty! Just the girl for you. Oh no, perhaps not. I've just remembered she's engaged. Announced last month. Still, she's very charming." The old voice, which was strong enough to penetrate any first-night babel in London, rattled on, and Campion felt for another twopence.

"I know," he shouted. "I know she's lovely, or at least I guessed

she was. But who, *who* is she? Also, of course, where?"

"What? Oh, *where* is she? With her aunt, of course. She's spending the winter there. She's too young, Albert. Straight down from the shires. The father owns a row of Welsh mountains or something equally romantic."

"Who?" bellowed Mr. Campion through the din, "Who, my good gramophone, is the aunt?"

"What did you call me, Albert?" The famous voice was dangerously soft.

"Gramophone," said Mr. Campion, who was a great believer in the truth when the worst had come to the worst.

"Oh, I thought you said . . . never mind." Lady Laradine, who had several grandchildren and regarded each new arrival as a personal insult, was mollified. "I do talk very fast, I know, especially on the phone. It's my exuberant spirit. You want to know who the aunt is. Why, Dora Carrington. You know her."

"I do," said Campion with relief. "I didn't realize she had a niece."

"Oh, but she has; just out of the nest. Presented last year. A sweetly pretty child. Such a pity she's engaged. Tell me, have you any information about Wivenhoe's son? No? Then what about the Pritchards?"

She went on and on with the relentless energy of the very bored, and it was not until Mr. Campion ran out of coppers that the monologue came to an end.

It was late in the morning, therefore, when Mr. Campion presented himself at the charming Lowndes Square house which Dora Carrington had made her London home.

Miss Gina Gray only decided to see him after a considerable pause, during which, he felt, old Pollard, the butler, must have worked hard vouching for his desirability.

She came into the lounge at last, looking much as he had thought she might, very young and startled, with frank, miserable eyes, but dark, curling hair instead of the sleek blonde he had somehow expected.

He introduced himself apologetically.

"It's rather odd turning up like this out of the blue," he said, "but you'll have to forgive me. Perhaps you could think of me as a sort of long-lost elderly relative. I might have been your uncle, of course, if Dora had taken it into her head to marry me instead of Tubby, not that the idea ever occurred to either of us at the time,

of course. Don't get that into your head. I only say it might have happened so that you'll see the sort of reliable bird I am."

He paused. The alarm had died out of her eyes and she even looked wanly amused. He was relieved. Idiotic conversation, although invaluable, was not a luxury which he often permitted himself now that the thirty-five-year-old landmark was passed.

"It's very nice of you to come," she said in a polite, small voice. "What can I do?"

"Nothing. I came to return something I think you've lost, that's all." He fished in his pocket and drew out the ring. "That's yours, isn't it?" he said gently.

He had expected some reaction, but not that it would be so violent. She stood trembling before him, every tinge of color draining out of her face.

"Where did you get it?" she whispered, and then, pulling herself together with a desperate courage which he rather admired, she shook her head. "It's not mine. I've never seen it before. I don't know who you are either, and I—I don't want to. Please go away."

"Oh, Gina Gray!" said Mr. Champion. "Gina Gray, don't be silly. I'm the original old gentleman with the kind heart. Don't deny the irrefutable."

"It's not mine." To his horror he saw tears in her eyes. "It's not mine. It's not. It's not. Go away."

She turned and made for the door, her slender, brown-suited figure looking very small and fugitive as she ran.

Mr. Champion was still debating his next move when Dora came in, a vision of fox-furs and smiles.

"My dear!" she said. "You haven't been to see us for years and years and now you turn up when I'm due out to lunch in fifteen minutes. Where have you been?"

"About," said Mr. Champion truthfully, reflecting that it was all wrong that the people one never had time to visit were always one's oldest and closest friends.

They drank a cocktail together and were still reminiscing happily when Dora's luncheon escort arrived. In the end Mr. Champion showed his hostess out of her own house and was standing rather forlornly on the pavement, waving after her departing car, when he observed a familiar figure stumping dejectedly down the steps which he had so recently descended himself.

"Jonathan!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

Mr. Jonathan Peters started violently, as if he had been caught

sleep-walking, and looked up with only a faint smile on his gloomy young face.

"Hallo, Champion," he said. "I didn't see you. I've been kicking my heels in the breakfast room. Hell! Let's go and have a drink."

In the end, after some half-hearted bickering, they went along to that home from home, the Junior Greys, and Mr. Champion, who, in company with the rest of the world, considered himself to be the best listener on earth, persuaded his young acquaintance to unburden himself.

Jonathan was a younger brother of the two Peterses who had been Champion's Cambridge companions, and in the ordinary way the ten years' difference in their ages would have raised an insurmountable barrier between them; but at the moment Jonathan was a man with a sorrow.

"It's Gina," he said. "We're engaged, you know."

"Really?" Mr. Champion was interested. "What's the row?"

"Oh, I suppose it'll be all right in the end." The young man sounded wistful and only partially convinced. "I mean, I think she'll come round. Anyway, I hope so. What annoys me is that I'm the one with the grievance, and yet here I am dithering around as though it were all my fault." He frowned and shook his head over the unreasonableness of life in general and love in particular.

"You were at Porky Allenbrough's show last night, I suppose?" Mr. Champion put the question innocently and was rewarded.

"Yes, we both were. I didn't see you there. There was a tremendous crush and it might have been a really good bust if it hadn't been for one thing and another. I've got a genuine grouch, you know." Mr. Peters' young face was very earnest, and under the influence of half a pint of excellent Chablis he came out with the full story.

As far as Mr. Champion could make out from his somewhat disjointed account the history was a simple one. Miss Gina Gray, while enjoying the London season, had yet not wished to give up all strenuous physical exercise and so had formed the habit of hunting with the Whippersfield five or six times a month. On these occasions she had been entertained by a relation of Dora Carrington's husband who lived in the district and had very kindly stabled her horses for her. Her custom had been to run down by car early in the morning, returning to London either at night or on the following day.

In view of all this hospitality, it had been arranged that she should go to the Priory Ball with her host and his party, while Jonathan should attend with another group of people from a different house. The arrangement between the couple had been, therefore, that, while Gina should arrive at the ball with her own crowd, Jonathan should have the privilege of driving her back before joining his own host and hostess.

"It was a bit thick," he concluded resentfully. "Gina turned up with a crowd of people I didn't know, including a lad whom nobody seemed to have seen before. She danced with him most of the evening and finally he drove her home himself. He left me a message to say so, the little toot. I felt fed up and I imagine I may have got pretty tight, but anyway, when I arrived at the town house this morning ready to forgive and forget like a hero, she wouldn't even see me."

"Infuriating," agreed Mr. Campion, his eyes thoughtful. "Did you find out who this interloping tick happened to be?"

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders.

"I did hear his name . . . Robertson, or something. Apparently he's been hunting fairly regularly this season and he came along with Gina's lot. That's all I know."

"What did he look like?"

Jonathan screwed up his eyes in an effort of recollection.

"An ugly blighter," he said at last. "Ordinary height, I think. I don't remember much about him except that I disliked his face."

It was not a very helpful description, but Mr. Campion sat pondering over it for some time after the despondent Jonathan had wandered off to keep an afternoon appointment.

Suddenly he sat up, a new expression on his lean, good-humored face.

"Rocks," he said under his breath. "Rocks Denver . . ." and he made for the nearest telephone.

It was nine o'clock that evening when Superintendent Oates came striding into his office and, flinging his hat upon the desk, turned to survey the elegant, dinner-jacketed visitor who had been patiently awaiting his arrival for the best part of half an hour.

"Got him," he said briefly. "The lads shadowed him to Peachy Dale's club in Rosebery Avenue, and then, of course, we knew we were safe. Peachy may be a rotten fence, but he's the only man in London who would have handled those snuff boxes, now I come to

think of it. It was a lovely cop. We gave him time to get settled and then closed in on all five entrances. There he was with the stuff in a satchel. It was beautiful. I've never seen a man so astounded in my life."

He paused and a reminiscent smile floated over his sad face.

"A little work of art, that's what that arrest was, a little work of art."

"That's fine, then," said his visitor, rising. "I think I'll drift."

"No, you don't, my lad." The superintendent was firm. "You don't do conjuring tricks under my nose without an explanation. You come across."

Mr. Campion sighed.

"My dear good Enthusiast, what more can you possibly want?" he protested. "You've got the man and you've got the swag. That's enough for a conviction—and Porky's blessing."

"Very likely, but what about my dignity?" Oates was severe. "It may be enough for the Bench, but it's not enough for me. Who do you think you are, the Home Office?"

"Heaven forbid," said Mr. Campion piously. "I thought you might express your ingratitude in this revolting way. Look here, if I explain, my witness doesn't go into Court. Is that a bet?"

The superintendent held out his hand.

"May I be struck pink," he said sincerely. "I mean it."

Since he knew from experience that this was an oath that Oates held peculiarly sacred, Mr. Campion relented.

"Give me twenty minutes," he said. "I'll go and fetch her."

Oates groaned. "Another woman!" he exploded. "You find 'em, don't you? All right, I'll wait."

Miss Gina Gray looked so genuinely pathetic as she came into the office clinging to Mr. Campion's arm a little over half an hour later that Oates, who had an unexpected weakness for youth and beauty, was inclined to be mollified. Campion observed the first signs of his heavily avuncular mood with relief.

"It's perfectly all right," he said to the girl at his side. "I've given you my word you'll be kept clean out of it. This solemn-looking person will be struck a fine hunting pink if he attempts to make me break it. That's written in the unchanging stars. Isn't that so, superintendent?"

Oates regarded him with fishy eyes.

"You go and put on your mask," he said. "Now, what is all this? What's been going on?"

Gina Gray required a little gentle pumping, but beneath Campion's expert treatment she began to relax, and within ten minutes she was pouring out her story with all the energy of injured innocence behind it.

"I met the man I knew as Tony Roberts—you say his real name is Rocks Denver—in the hunting-field," she said. "He always seemed to be out when I was, and he talked to me as people do out hunting. I didn't know him, he wasn't a friend, but I got used to him being about. He rode very well and he helped me out of a mess once or twice. You know that sort of acquaintance, don't you?"

Oates nodded and shook his head. He was smiling.

"We do," he said. "And then what?"

"Then nothing," declared Miss Gray innocently. "Nothing at all until last night. We were all getting ready to go to the Priory in three or four cars when he phoned me at Major Carrington's, where I was staying, and said his car had broken down in the village and he'd got to leave it and would it be awful cheek of him to ask if one of us would give him a lift to the hall. I said of course, naturally, and when we met him trudging along, rather disconsolate in full kit, we stopped and picked him up."

Oates glanced at Campion triumphantly.

"So that's how he got in?" he said. "Neat, eh? I see, Miss Gray. And then when you got your acquaintance to the party you didn't like to leave him cold. Is that how it was?"

The girl blushed and her dark eyes were very frank.

"Well, he *was* rather out of everything and he *did* dance very well," she admitted apologetically. "He hadn't talked much about himself, and it was only then I realized he didn't live near and didn't know everybody else. His—his manners were all right."

Oates laughed. "Oh yes, Rocky's very presentable," he agreed. "He's one of the lads who let his old school down, I'm afraid. Well, and then what?"

She hesitated and turned to Campion.

"I've been so incredibly silly," she murmured. It was a direct appeal, and the superintendent was not unchivalrous.

"There's nothing new in that, miss," he observed kindly. "We all make errors of judgment at times. You missed him for a bit, I suppose?"

"Yes, I danced with several people and I'd half forgotten him when he turned up at my elbow with a raincoat over his arm. He

took me out on the terrace and put it over my shoulders and said—oh, a lot of silly things about being there alone without a soul to speak to. He said he'd found one man he knew, but that he was wrapped up with some woman or other, and suggested that we borrow this friend's car and go for a run round. It was getting rather late and I was livid with Jonathan anyway, so I said all right."

"Why were you livid with Jonathan?" Campion put the question curiously and Miss Gray met his eyes.

"He got jealous as soon as we arrived and drowned his sorrows rather too soon."

"I see." Campion smiled as he began to understand Mr. Peters' astonishing magnanimity, which had hitherto seemed somewhat too saintly to be strictly in character.

"Well then . . ." Oates went back to the main story ". . . off you went in the car. You drove around for quite a while."

Gina took a deep breath.

"Yes," she said steadily. "We drove around for a bit, but not very far. The car wasn't his, you see, and he had trouble with it. It started all right, but it conked out down the lane and he was fooling about with it for a long time. He got so frightfully angry that I began to feel—well, rather uncomfortable. Also I was cold. He had taken the raincoat off my shoulders and flung it in the back seat, and I remembered that it was heavy and warm, so I turned to get it. Just then he closed the bonnet and came back. He snatched the coat and swore at me, and I began to get thoroughly frightened. I tried to persuade him to take me back, but he just drove on down the lane towards the main road. It was then that we passed the three policemen on motorcycles racing towards the Priory. That seemed to unnerve him completely and he turned off towards Major Carrington's house, with the car limping and misfiring all the time. I didn't know what to do. I was far too frightened to make a row, you see, because I was a guest at the major's, and—well, there was Jonathan and Aunt Dora to consider and—oh, you do understand, don't you?"

"I think so," said Campion gravely. "When did you take off your ring?"

She gaped at him.

"Why, at that moment," she said. "How did you know? It's a stupid trick I have when I'm nervous. It was rather loose, and I pulled it off and started to play with it. He looked down and saw

me with it and seemed to lose his head. He snatched it out of my hand and demanded to know where I'd got it, and then, when he saw it clearly by the dashboard light, he suddenly pitched it out of the window in disgust. It was so utterly unexpected that I forgot where I was and made a leap for it across him. Then—then I'm afraid the car turned over."

"Well, well," said Oates inadequately. "And so there you were, so to speak."

She nodded gravely. "I was so frightened," she said. "Fortunately we were quite near the house, but my dress was spoilt and I was shaken and bruised, and I just set off across the fields and let myself in by the stable gate. He came after me, and we had a dreadful sort of row in whispers, out in the drive. He wanted me to put him up for the night, and didn't seem to realize that I was a visitor and couldn't dream of doing such a thing. In the end I showed him where the saddle room was, off the stable yard. There was a stove there and some rugs and things. Then I sneaked up to my room and went to bed. This morning I pretended that I'd had a headache and got somebody to give me a lift home. He'd gone by then, of course."

"Of course he had. Hopped on one of those country buses before the servants stirred," Oates put in with satisfaction. "He relied on you to hold your tongue for your own sake."

"There wasn't much else he could do in the circumstances," observed Campion mildly. "Once he had the howling misfortune to pick a sick car all his original plans went to pieces. He used Miss Gray to get the stuff safely out of the house in the usual false pocket of the raincoat. Then his idea must have been to drive her a mile or two down the road and strand her, while he toddled off to Town alone. The breakdown delayed him and, once he saw the police were about, he knew the cordon would go round and that he was trapped, so he had to think out other tactics. That exercise seems to have unnerved him entirely. I can understand him wanting to get into the house. After all, it'd be a first-class hiding-place in the circumstances. Yes, well, that's fairly clear now, I hope, superintendent. Here's your ring, Miss Gray."

As Gina put out her hand for the trinket her eyes grew puzzled.

"You're a very frightening person," she said. "How on earth did you know it was mine?"

"Quite." Oates was frankly suspicious. "If you've never met this young lady before, I don't see how you guessed it belonged to her."

Campion stood regarding the girl with genuine surprise.

"My dear child," he said, "surely you know yourself? Who had this ring made for you?"

"No one. It was left to me. My father's sister died about six months ago and told me in a letter always to wear it for luck. It doesn't seem to have brought me much."

For a moment Campion seemed completely bewildered. After a while, however, he laughed.

"Your father's sister? Were you named after her?"

"Yes, I was." Miss Gray's dark eyes were widening visibly. "How do you know all this? You're frightening."

Campion took the ring between his thumb and forefinger and turned it slowly round, while the stones winked and glittered in the hard electric light.

"It's such a simple trick I hardly like to explain and spoil the effect," he said. "About fifty years ago it was a fairly common conceit to give young ladies rings like this. You see, I knew this was Gina Gray's ring because it had her name on the wrapper, as it were. Look, start at the little gold star and what have you? Garnet, Indicolite—that's an indigo variety of tourmaline, superintendent—Nephrite, Amethyst, then another smaller gold star and Garnet again, Rose Quartz, Agate, and finally Yellow Sapphire. There you are. I thought you must know. G.I.N.A. G.R.A.Y., all done according to the best sentimental jewellery tradition. As soon as I came to consider the ring in cold blood it was obvious. Look at it, Oates. What man in his senses would put that collection of stones together if he didn't mean something by them?"

The superintendent did not answer immediately. He sat turning the ring round and round with an expression of grudging astonishment on his grey face. When at last he did look up he expressed himself unexpectedly.

"Fancy that," he said. "Dear me."

When Miss Gray had departed in a taxicab, which, on Mr. Campion's suggestion, a patient and sober Jonathan had kept ticking up outside on the Embankment during the whole of the short interview, he was more explicit.

"She had her name on it," he said after a moment or two of purely decorative imagery. "She had her dear little name on it! Very smart of you, Mr. Campion. Don't let it go to your head. I don't know if I'm quite satisfied yet. Who put you on to Rocky? Why Rocky? Why

not any other of the fifty first-class jewel thieves in London?"

Campion grinned. It was not often that the superintendent condescended to ask straight questions and he felt justifiably gratified by the phenomenon.

"You said he was a 'pro,' " he explained. "That was the first step. Then young Jonathan Peters told me Gina had met the fellow hunting regularly, and so, putting two and two together, I arrived at Rocky. Rocky is an anachronism in the underworld; he can ride. How many jewel thieves do you know who can ride well enough to turn up at a hunt, pay their caps, and not make an exhibition of themselves? Hunting over strange country isn't trotting round the Row, you know."

Oates shook his head sadly.

"You depress me," he said. "First you think of the obvious and then you go and say it, and then you're proved right. It's very irritating. The ring was a new one on me, though. D'you know, I wouldn't mind giving my wife one of those. It's a pretty idea. She'd like it. Besides," he added seriously, "it might come in useful some time. You never know."

In the end Campion sat down and worked it out for him.

SOLUTION TO THE AUGUST "UNSOLVED":

Detective Plane: Monday, Rome, Graffiti Artist; "Caught red-handed."

Detective Pilfer: Tuesday, New York, Impostor; "Caught in the act."

Detective Paint: Wednesday, London, Hijacker; "Caught on the fly."

Detective Parents: Thursday, Athens, Cat Burglar; "Caught napping."

Detective Portray: Friday, Kitchen, Six-year-old; "Caught with his hand in the cookie jar."

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Illustration by Jim Gilsen

Having survived the killings in *Where Lawyers Fear to Tread*, young San Francisco lawyer Willa Jansson returns in **A Radical Departure** (Bantam, \$3.50, 181 pp.), the latest mystery by lawyer-author Lia Matera. The senior partner in Willa's law firm is lunching at his favorite watering spot when he polishes off his mousse—including its hemlock garnish. It appears as if Willa's going to be suspected (once again!), but the outlook is still grim when the police's attentions switch to someone new: Willa's hippie mother. Willa narrates these tales, and what she lacks in charm she makes up for in sheer energy and brashness; and the portraits of sixties dropouts in the yuppie eighties are sometimes hilarious, and occasionally scarier than the murder plot.

Murder on Clam Pond by Douglas Kiker (Ballantine, \$3.50, 249 pp.) is one of those quietly compelling novels that reverberate in memory long after they've been read. Mac McFarland debuts in this novel, and we find him nursing his wounds in a shabby lakeside cabin on Cape Cod, trying to recover from having recently lost both wife and job in the same month. It is he who finds the body of the small town's major philanthropist, dead in the snow outside her own mansion door. The discovery quickly leads to a new job for Mac, stringing for a major Boston newspaper, and his nose for news leads him into the heart of the town's leading citizens, its secret

past—and a new love. This is neatly done, and I'm looking forward to the sequel.

John McAleer's first Austin Layman novel, **Coign of Vantage**, should please mystery lovers on several levels. Subtitled "The Boston Athenaeum Murders," the novel is rich in Boston lore: its history, its traditions of gentlemen's clubs, its Brahmins. This is also a book for lovers of sophisticated dialogue, fanciers of libraries and bookish matters, and those who appreciate their tales laced with romance, satire, and wit. This is a cosy with an American setting, albeit the most Britishfied of our cities. (Countryman, \$16.95, 273 pp.)

W.R. Philbrick's second J.D. Hawkins mystery, **Ice for the Eskimo** (Signet, \$3.50, 254 pp.), warns us of the fate that will befall the P.I. Hawkins hires to protect his best friend's family. There are plenty of surprises in store for us, however, in this well-wrought tale of police corruption, kidnapping, scandal, and murder. Hawkins, a successful mystery author, was put in a wheelchair for life by a freak accident. It doesn't stop him from investigating his friend's case, with near-fatal consequences. Strong characters, a multi-level plot, and heart-stopping action make this one difficult to put down.

The author of the nonfiction *Coroner* has joined forces with the creator of the Jacob Asch private eye novels. The result is **Unnatural Causes**, and it bodes well for future collaborations between Thomas T. Noguchi, M.D., and novelist Arthur Lyons. Art imitates life here, with much success. The protagonist is, as Noguchi was, chief medical examiner for Los Angeles. Dr. Eric Parker is an attractive hero, intense and committed, often at odds with the politicians. The novel opens with the drowning of a superstar young comedian, brilliant but not beloved. The original determination is accidental death, but something is nagging at Parker and he won't let it rest. There's lots to like here: the medical background is fascinating and different; the cast of characters is a strong one; the murder method itself intriguing. (Putnam, \$17.95, 319 pp.)

Tony Hillerman's latest is titled **A Thief of Time**, and it refers to someone who robs artefacts from gravesites and architectural digs on Native American settlements. As in *Skinwalkers*, Hillerman has put both of his series characters in one novel, and it's a dilly. Those of you familiar with Hillerman's beautifully-rendered Navajo novels need only know that this one takes us into the Anasazi culture, as well as into the private lives of Chee and Leap-horn, both of whom are suffering a personal loss. Those of you not

familiar with Tony Hillerman, I can only advise you to run—not walk—to your nearest bookstore. (Harper & Row, \$15.95, 224 pp.)

K.C. Constantine fans will want to look for his newest Mario Balzic novel, **Joey's Case** (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 240 pp.). An old man hassles Police Chief Balzic for months over the death of his no-good son, despite Balzic's repeated explanations that the case is out of his jurisdiction. Finally, he reluctantly agrees to investigate what seems to be a cut-and-dried case of a domestic shooting. Balzic's investigation is weighed down by his concern over his health, and Rocksburg, Pennsylvania, seems to have lost some of its freshness; but this one is worth reading anyway.

A Good Year for Murder by A.E. Eddenden should appeal to fans of cosies, for it has that comfortably quirky quality we look for in our lightest of mysteries. The setting goes a long way toward warming up the tale. The time is 1940; the place is a small Canadian town, one where all the holidays are celebrated town-wide. And therein lies the tale, for the first of the ominous doings occurs on Valentine's Day. As each holiday rolls around, the town tenses for the next act of violence, which all too soon becomes murder. The victims are the members of the Town Council, and small-town politics is part of the problem. In the form of the generously-proportioned Inspector Thretheway, we are treated to a genuinely likable character who deserves his own series. Author Eddenden surrounds Thretheway with a strong supporting cast, and fills in the rest of the calendar year with evocative portraits of civic celebrations, card tournaments, afternoons sipping iced tea on front porches. It's a nostalgia-steeped story with a warm, old fashioned sentiment, lots of mayhem, and not a little wit. (Academy Chicago, \$15.95, 178 pp.)

Bridget A. Smith's first novel is set in Juneau, Alaska, where she makes her home and, as above, that's no small part of the novel's appeal. **Death of an Alaskan Princess** introduces female psychologist and young widow Wynne, who is also an amateur art collector. It is at a gathering of artists and collectors, a showing for the new Indian-influenced paintings by the artist David Whitmore, where Wynne sees the lovely Magdalena for the last time. Days later, the young Alaskan's body is found, an apparent suicide—or so it seems initially. Magdalena was in one of Wynne's therapy groups, and Wynne can't believe the girl killed herself. Her investigation leads her further into the art world, the strange financial circles of Juneau (so dramatically affected by the Alaskan pipeline), and the tribal customs of Alaskan Indians. Smith invites

us to see her city, and it's definitely worth the trip. (St. Martin's \$12.95, 149 pp.)

Money Trouble is a welcome third adventure of William J. Reynolds' detective Nebraska, so named for the state adopted by Nebraska's Eastern European grandfather when he emigrated to the U.S. decades earlier. Reynolds' *The Nebraska Quotient* was nominated for a Shamus award by the Private Eye Writers of America; it was followed by *Moving Targets*. This latest adventure opens with a phone call from a high school girlfriend—"the one that got away" from him. Her husband has been identified as the man the police fatally shot during a routine license check, the man who the cops believe was pulling off the Omaha bank heists that had plagued them for months. The wife says that can't be so, that the police are framing Greg—and harassing her—to make the shooting legitimate. Nebraska isn't having much luck at his mystery writing, so he agrees to look into the case. It plunges him into a maelstrom of greed and violence with a shocking twist. If you're looking for a new gumshoe, try Nebraska on for size. (Putnam's, \$16.95, 224 pp.)

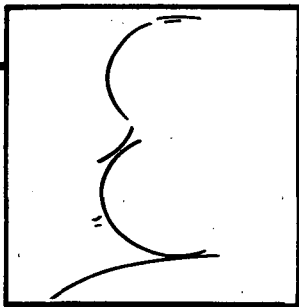
Peter Lovesey, author of the excellent Sergeant Cribb series, returns to the Victorian era with **Bertie and the Tinman** (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 212 pp.). This is pure delight from beginning to end. The author's conceit is that the story is a memoir written by "Bertie," Victoria's eldest son, the Prince of Wales himself. Ever the sportsman, Bertie mourns with all of England over the suicide death of a celebrated (and hugely successful) jockey; Bertie had bet on the man a number of times himself. But Bertie is also suspicious; the death was attributed to delirium brought on by typhoid (which Bertie had at one time), and Bertie doesn't believe the diagnosis. So he sets out to investigate, and thus begins a rousing tale with humor, period details, and a wild pace. This is wonderful fun.



A blind Faye Dunaway on the fatal yacht in *Midnight Crossing*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



Two million dollars in cash lies stashed on Rio Lobo, a tiny island about thirty miles off the coast of Cuba. Two couples set out on a **Midnight Crossing** from Miami in a sixty foot yacht to snag the money out from under the eyes of the Cuban navy. The older man, who was with the U.S. Army when the money was left on the island just before Castro came to power, knows the hiding place. The younger man, who owns the yacht, has a map left him by his father, who was also with the army on the island, showing the navigational coordinates for finding the place.

There must be examples of illegal partnerships in which a clean fifty-fifty split is made, but there never has been a movie and never will be one in which greed doesn't get in the way. Nor does greed ever come without lust, which come to

think of it does make sense. In *Midnight Crossing* the older man is planning to take all the loot and, along with it, his partner's wife. The older wife, who is blind, knows what is going on, though the younger husband seems to see nothing. He wants only to run a successful charter yacht, which explains why his wife is discontented.

As the treasure hunt progresses, three of the four characters turn out to have been scheming in a more sinister and complicated way than we imagined. The money is located—or seems to be. There is a killing—or what appears to be one. The yacht drifts on its sultry night crossing back to Miami while the characters stalk one another with a variety of weapons and bludgeons. The surprise twists, as each of their schemes unwinds itself, have the feel of the reversals in *The*

Sting, in which nothing and no one end up being what they seemed.

But *The Sting* was a comedy; *Midnight Crossing* means to be serious suspense. On paper it no doubt comes across as a steamy thriller with plenty of sex and greed in the manner of the John Garfield-Lana Turner *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. But things have changed since that movie of a lovers' plot to kill the husband. It was hard to get by in 1946: Garfield and Turner are aware that they will end up being down and out if they run off together without taking any money. Because times simply aren't that hard any more, the attempt to lend an atmosphere of greed to *Midnight Crossing* fails. At the beginning the older couple entertains the younger in a distinctly posh house; the younger couple's yacht is a magnificent object to own, even if it does carry a mortgage. Everyone knows that the comfortable life doesn't eliminate greed, but it sure does remove the driving necessity for money that fueled movies like *Postman*.

The first forty minutes of *Midnight Crossing* feel like the beginning of a Hitchcock movie. Two unremarkable couples have dinner together and plan a yacht

trip. The only special circumstance is the recent blindness of the older wife, played by Faye Dunaway. Not until we have watched all the humdrum preparations and setting sail, with the trip well along, does the older man tell of the treasure and set about persuading the younger—with the help of the younger wife—to take him to Rio Lobo. The situation therefore resembles the classic Hitchcock dilemma of the ingenuous, innocent protagonist whose fate is wound into the intricate designs of another.

The secret of Hitchcock's success with this formula was his profound respect for the daily life and settled values of ordinary people. Any such vision, unfortunately, is missing from *Midnight Crossing*. The little details of mundane behavior turn out to be so much padding to get the movie along to the point where its plot twists take over. Nor are the details used efficiently. Faye Dunaway is instructed in how to feel her way along the main boom rope and release it from the capstan in case a heavy wind should threaten to flip the boat over. But no such wind ever arises. Like *Midnight Crossing's* other early promises, nothing comes of it.

THE STORY THAT WON

The April Mysterious Photo-Wayne Pereira of Richwood, mentions go to Stefanie Anconsin; Rick Nichols of Gar-White Plains, New York; ville, Illinois; Alfred W. Cross Gerald A. Griffiths of San McNeely of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Reginald C. Fallin of Saluda, Virginia; Peter M. Winkler of Franklin, Pennsylvania; Jennie Wastlake of Kenmore, New York; and Gene Greenawalt of Lakeland, Florida.



graph contest was won by West Virginia. Honorable toine of Germantown, Wisconsin, Texas; Annie Sturm of Thomas L. Bloor of Shelby-of Sacramento, California; Jose, California; Michael of Sacramento, California; Reginald C. Fallin of Saluda, Virginia; Peter M. Winkler of Franklin, Pennsylvania; Jennie Wastlake of Kenmore, New York; and Gene Greenawalt of Lakeland, Florida.

ROOKERY by Wayne Pereira

The woman on the street below clutched at her throat, from which the bird had snatched the diamond pendant. "I been rooked!" she hollered.

"Good bird!" I crowed, accepting the pendant from my accomplice. All the months of training were finally beginning to pay off. This was our third major score of the week and, unlike other partners I had worked with, this one had no interest in a share of the money. I sprinkled a handful of cracked corn on the rooftop. In fact this one worked for chicken feed. I laughed aloud. "You're going to make me rich, bird!"

"Birdbrain!" The young detective stepped out of hiding and leveled his .38 at me. "Or perhaps I should say 'jailbird.'"

The bird took one look at the gun, and, just like every other accomplice I had ever worked with, he flew the coop.

The detective laughed. "Fifteen stories down, Birdie. Want to try it?"

I wrung my hands. "I thought this was the perfect setup. How'd you get onto me?"

The boyish face broke into a grin. "You know what they say about birds of a feather? Well, this is my very first case, and that . . ."

"Of course!" I fell onto my knees and pounded my fists into the rooftop. "That makes you a *rookie*."

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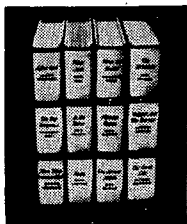
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